Elephant

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/1751189.

Rating:	Mature
Archive Warning:	Creator Chose Not To Use Archive Warnings
Category:	M/M
Fandom:	Hetalia: Axis Powers
Relationships:	Canada (Hetalia)/Prussia (Hetalia), England (Hetalia)/France (Hetalia), America (Hetalia)/Russia (Hetalia), South Italy (Hetalia)/Spain (Hetalia), Germany (Hetalia)/North Italy (Hetalia)
Characters:	Canada (Hetalia), Prussia (Hetalia), France (Hetalia), England (Hetalia), America (Hetalia), Russia (Hetalia), Germany (Hetalia), North Italy (Hetalia), Spain (Hetalia), South Italy (Hetalia), Background & Cameo Characters
Additional Tags:	FACE Family, Alternate Universe - High School, Slow Burn, Friends to Lovers, Work In Progress, Angst, Drama, Humor, Fluff, Emotional Baggage, Emotional Hurt/Comfort, Coming of Age, Firsts, Eventual Smut, Family Issues
Language:	English
Stats:	Published: 2014-06-06 Updated: 2024-01-10 Words: 146,158 Chapters: 21/30

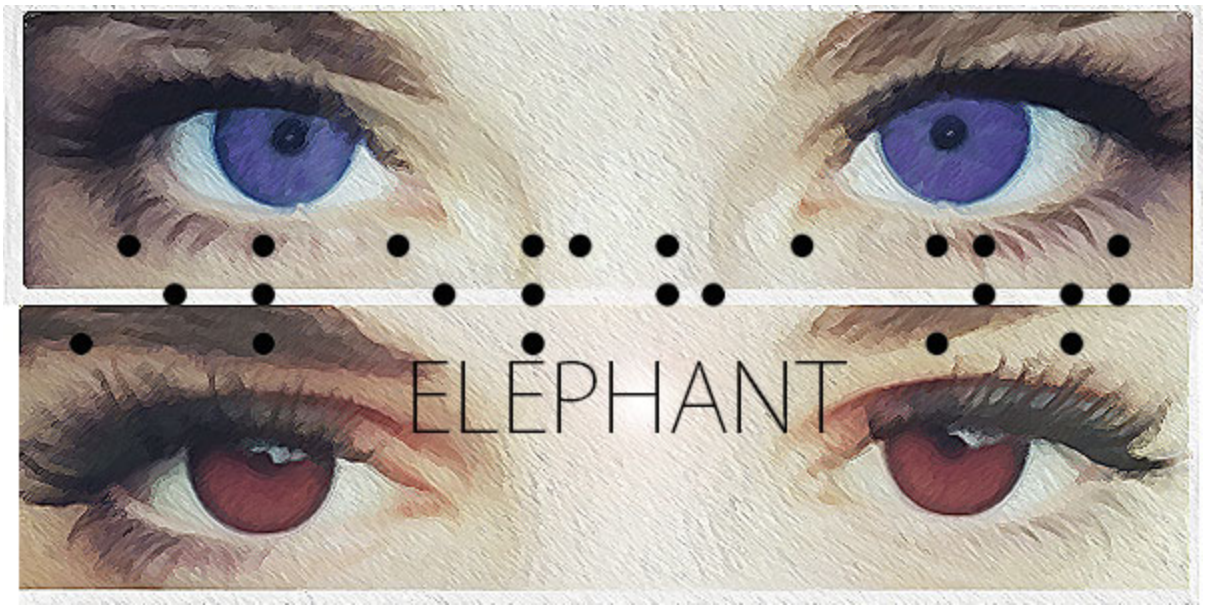
Elephant

by BrewedAwakening

Summary

Everyone knew who he was. Teachers, students, people at the grocery store—he was basically a celebrity. Matthew Bonnefoy, "the blind kid." He was so popular, in fact, that people couldn't bear to keep their eyes off of him. Or speak to him. Or acknowledge his existence. The elephant in the room, that was Matthew. And for pretty much his whole life he had always been just kind of...there. That is, until he meets a nosy kid named Gilbert, who decides that "there" just isn't good enough.

Prologue, Part I: Up



⁘

This was the longest car ride of Arthur's life. The rain was coming down with no end in sight. It pounded down mercilessly on the slick streets below, like it was mocking the inner turmoil taking over Arthur’s mind. His heart was racing, and he folded his hands in his lap in an effort to calm himself. It was easier said than done though, especially when Arthur was so fixated on this train speeding past him, and the fact that it was moving while the car he sat in wasn't.

Tap. Tap. Tap, tap, tap.

It was Arthur's foot, tapping against the floor as he watched the train rumble over the tracks, wondering just how bloody long this train could actually be, how much longer he would have to sit, and why the hell this train had decided to pass right here and now, while his breakfast was threatening to leave his stomach.

This train was one thing, but the rain was another. If only this rain would let up, he thought, clasping his hands tighter, then Francis could drive faster. God, how much he wanted that. A swift end to this absolute nightmare of a trip. He wanted to go, to leave this unfamiliar place. But he couldn't. At this railroad crossing, in front of these tracks, Arthur was trapped, forced to acknowledge the deep feeling of dread crawling along every inch of his skin. It was unbearable.

The train was fast, thank God, and watching it speed past in a blur gave Arthur the slightest bit of solace. They'd be moving again soon. Soon, boys, he thought to himself, we'll be home soon.

Tap, tap, tap. Tap, tap, tap.

Francis pulled his eyes from the passing train and looked over at his husband with a frown, wrinkles worrying his forehead. His eyes traveled down to Arthur's restless foot, up to the stiff hands in his lap, and finally to his face. He expected to see some sort of change, some sort of crack in the cold expression that had been on Arthur's face since they'd started off this morning. But no, it was still there.

After the way they'd argued last night, Francis shouldn't have been surprised; they hadn't even kissed each other goodnight. He shouldn't have been surprised, and yet still he was, because the contempt Arthur wore so clearly on his face contradicted everything his body was doing. His shoulders were rigid, his arms held close to his body, and yes, he was restless, clasping and unclasping his hands, shifting in his seat, and now, this tapping. On his face was irritation, but in his every movement was fear.

Francis knew it, recognized it because he held that same fear. That same fear was the reason why his hands were still so clammy against the steering wheel, even after two hours on the road. It was the same reason why he'd lie awake last night in their hotel room, listening to Arthur sniffle when he thought Francis had already fallen asleep, and wondering how much more of this they could take. Wondering what their future, their family's future, was going to look like.

That scowl on Arthur's face was meant to deter him, keep him quiet. Keep him from saying the things he'd tried to say last night. And Arthur's lips were shut so tightly, as if he too wanted to prevent himself from triggering a repeat of last night. But for Francis, who saw in his husband the very same terror that made his own body run cold, it was apparent now more than ever just how much they needed to finish what they'd started. Right here and now.

Francis held his gaze on Arthur's face, wanting so badly for for those cold eyes to meet his. But they didn't. He watched Arthur's shoulders fall just the slightest bit as the last car of the train passed, and he faced forward again, stepping on the gas once the barriers at the crossing lifted to allow them through.

As the car moved slowly across the bumpy tracks, Arthur's foot fell silent. Francis accelerated, and Arthur felt like an utter fool for having convinced himself that train was the sole source of his apprehension. Once they got moving again, his heart would calm, and his thoughts would stop racing, he'd told himself. But deep down, he'd known that wasn't true. The tracks were clear, Francis was picking up speed, and yet his mind wasn't any less jumbled, his heart no less heavy.

They were moving, but in reality, for Arthur, nothing had actually changed. These past two days were supposed to have been different, were supposed to have given them hope. But it had all been a waste of time. Time they would never get back. He swallowed thickly, fingers coming to grip at the seat belt across his chest. He would never understand it, how cruel this world could be to those who'd done nothing to deserve it. Matthew had done *nothing* to deserve this.

“Arthur,” Francis said softly, pulling the anxious man from his thoughts. “Please. Talk to me.”

Pulling his eyes from the road just for a moment, he glanced over again at the man seated at his side, eyes pleading. It had been nearly an hour since they'd last spoken, since Francis had asked Arthur if he wanted the radio, and Arthur had given a snippy, "I think not."

And so they'd been driving in complete silence since then, not a word from either of them. Francis had wanted to give Arthur time to cool down, thought that maybe if he did, Arthur would be the one to break the silence. But Francis couldn't take it any longer, sitting here trying to prolong the inevitable. They needed to talk. And they needed to do it now.

He frowned when he didn't get a response. Instead Arthur simply glared forward at the long stretching road ahead, his lips set in a tight line. Arthur didn't even want to look at Francis, let alone speak to him. The sooner they could get home, the better. He just wanted to see his children, and forget about the nonsense he had heard that morning. These doctors disgusted him.

“Arthur,” Francis pressed, his voice stern. There was no more avoiding this. He knew how stubborn the man could be, but he could be just as adamant.

“There’s nothing to talk about, Francis,” he spat.

"What?" The word came out of him much too softly for all the shock it held, and he gripped the wheel tighter, feeling as if the wind had been knocked out of him.

He looked to Arthur, but still Arthur refused to look his way. It cut him even deeper, made his stomach drop and all he could do was take a deep breath as he looked back to the road. Arthur didn't believe that. Of course he didn't believe that. He didn't, so why on Earth would he say it with such conviction, knowing it wasn't at all true? Did he really think that was going to shut Francis up?

Francis clenched his jaw in frustration, cursed the godforsaken rain that made it impossible for his eyes to leave the road for more than a few seconds. That was exactly when he spotted a road sign signaling a gas station in a quarter of a mile. And he looked back at Arthur, who was still glaring ahead, his mind already made up. Just a quarter of a mile more. And then he could finally put an end to this suffocating silence.

From the corner of his eye Arthur could see Francis stiffen in his seat, but to his surprise Francis said nothing more. And he waited, his own shoulders stiff in anticipation of Francis saying his name again, hoped to God that he wouldn't parrot more of that doctor's garbage. Thankfully, he didn't. And when Arthur realized that he wasn't going to say anything else, he faced the window. He wasn't sure how much time had passed between the moment he'd looked out the window and the moment the car changed course, but he knew it couldn't have been very long.

The sudden jerk shook Arthur from his muddled thoughts, and he yelped as Francis veered right, wheels screeching in agony against the wet cement as he swerved into the empty station.

Gasping, Arthur clutched at his chest and scowled at the man behind the wheel. “What the bloody hell are you doing!” he shouted. “Are you trying to kill us both?”

This time it was Arthur who was answered with silence, and he became even more irritated that Francis seemed to be completely unfazed. The Englishman looked around as he tried to gather his bearings and scoffed with annoyance once he realized where they were.

“Why in the world did you stop here? We’re fine on gas!” he said, peeking at the fuel gauge to make sure he wasn't crazy. Still, Francis stayed silent and passed straight by the pumps, confusing the agitated man even more. “What are you—”

Arthur gasped again as Francis turned abruptly into one of the only two parking spaces there, turning off the engine and removing the keys. Arthur’s anger subsided for only a second, momentarily replaced by shock. Francis wasn't acting like himself. He watched as the other slowly removed his seat belt and slipped the keys into his pocket. He flinched slightly as their eyes met, startled by the other’s hard blue stare.

“Nothing to talk about?” he said, voice barely above a whisper. “Nothing to talk about, Arthur?”

And just like that, with his own words thrown back at him, his anger returned tenfold. “I gave you my answer and it won’t change! It won’t change, Francis!” he screamed.

“Arthur, please. Calm down,” Francis said, placing a gentle hand on Arthur’s own. He frowned when the Brit snatched away, fixing him with a spiteful glare.

“Drive,” he hissed. They both stared each other down in silence, thunder rumbling all around them from above.

“No," he said, just barely above a whisper. Francis had reached his limit. He was done dancing around the issue, done changing the subject. He was done acting like everything was alright, like they could just go on living leaving things the way they were. His eyes locked onto Arthur's, his voice clear and firm as he added, "We aren't going anywhere.”

"Drive the car, Francis," Arthur repeated, voice dangerously low as it forced its way through his tightening throat.

"No," he repeated. Mother Nature seemed to take Francis' side, the answer punctuated with a loud crack of thunder.

Arthur stared at him as the sky flashed with light, waiting for him to sigh in the way he always did, waiting for his shoulders to slink in surrender. But Francis didn't move an inch, didn't say another word, and Arthur could feel his gut sink. No. *No*, he couldn't do this.

Francis doubled back as Arthur lunged at him, a hand grabbing for the keys inside his pocket. Though startled, he quickly took hold of Arthur's arms, eyes wide as he watched his husband succumb to his own desperation, yanking and thrashing within his grip in an attempt to break free.

"Let me *go*."

His voice wavered slightly as he spoke past the knot in his throat, his breaths short and fast while he continued to struggle, adrenaline flooding throughout his body. Arthur couldn't do this right now. He was exhausted, both physically and mentally. Talking was the last thing he wanted to do. And what further unraveled him was how gentle the Frenchman's touch was, how even while he sat there trying to shove him away Francis held him like he was the only thing that mattered. And yet he still found himself screaming because he just wanted to go home, to go home and take his mind off of how dreadful that day had been.

"Let me go and just drive the damned car!"

“Not until we finish this discussion!”

Arthur was stunned, and he didn't bother hiding the way his body tensed, a barely audible gasp escaping his lips. Francis never raised his voice. Francis even surprised himself. He heaved a shaky sigh in an attempt to calm himself, his hands leaving Arthur's arms to gingerly caress either side of his face. “This won’t just disappear. No matter how much you want it to, it won’t.” He stared into his husband's eyes, full of sorrow and grief, and watched them squeeze shut.

"Don't you think I know that? I *know* that. He's my *child*," came his soft, choked reply. *His* child. His sickly, suffering child. Arthur could feel himself falling further and further apart, lips quivering, eyes welling, the knot in his throat becoming too much to bear. And so he surrendered, a sob ripping through his throat as he crumpled into himself.

"Arthur..." Francis' chest ached at the sight of his other half, broken, vulnerable. And Arthur held his head in his hands, disgusted with how pathetic he felt.

“What do you want me to say?” he sobbed, wiping at his face. “That I want those surgeons to blind him? That I want them to—” He shuddered as he was overcome with feelings of absolute horror. “To *gouge* out his eyes and leave him terrified? It’s inhumane!” He found himself laughing suddenly, the sound bitter and harsh. “We come all the way down here, and for what? Hours of driving only to be told what we've already been told before."

He snatched up the file sitting on the dashboard, Matthew's file, thick and heavy with the torment of the past two years. Blood tests, CAT scans, pathology reports, treatment plans, charts, diagrams, percentages—everything that reminded Arthur that to *them*, Matthew was just a patient. Just a number.

Francis watched as the manila folder was hurled to the floor, papers scattering, the Englishman thrusting it violently from his hands as if to deny its existence.

"God,” he croaked, “Matthew never asked for this. He’s been suffering his whole life! And now they want to take away his sight?" He looked to his husband, vision too blurry with his own tears to see the way Francis' throat constricted, to see the way his eyes resembled glass. "How could I allow that? How could I allow him to suffer even more?”

Arthur was angry. Not at his husband or the doctors, but at the fact that this disease had chosen to terrorize *his* son, robbing him of a normal childhood. Angry that after all they had done to keep their little boy out of harm’s way, he was still in constant danger. But most of

all, he was angry at himself. For not seeing the signs. For not knowing that there were signs *to* see. None of this would be happening if only he had noticed in time.

"Why didn't I see it sooner?" he asked, hands gripping at his hair. "If I had just—"

"No," Francis stopped him before he could even attempt to finish the thought.

"I could have—"

"*Arthur*," he said, the Brit's name a desperate plea. "Look at me." Arthur looked up as a calloused palm came to rest at his cheek, and Francis forgot to breathe as their eyes met, crushed by the look of guilt and shame on the other's face. His lips trembled as he spoke again. "This is *not* your fault. It isn't yours or mine or anyone's." Again, Arthur's eyes began to water, lips parting as he released a shallow breath.

"But I—"

"You didn't *know*." He took his husband's shaky hands and gave them a gentle squeeze. "*We* didn't know."

Arthur let out a choked sound, and Francis' heart felt like lead as he watched him slump in defeat.

"I know you're hurting. I do. I am too." He looked apologetically into those somber eyes, tenderly wiping away the steady falling tears. "I don't want this anymore than you do. But you have to understand that these doctors only want what's best for our Matthieu. If there was any other way, I wouldn't have even entertained the idea. But there isn't. This is our last resort. If we don't let them do this, we may lose him."

"But if we continue with the chemo, it could get better and—"

"But what if it doesn't? What if it gets worse?" Francis was firm, but not forceful. He just needed Arthur to understand how grave things were. They could no longer live in denial. "We can't risk it. Matthieu may lose his sight, but he will have his *life*."

Arthur froze as he was jolted back to reality, his own realization hitting him like a ton of bricks. What was he *doing*? Was he really gambling with something as precious as his child's life? He suddenly felt a wave of nausea throughout his body as feelings of shame and regret washed over him, utterly disgusted with himself.

Denial. It was a nasty, ruthless little pest. It had taken a hold of the both of them for a long while, but Arthur just couldn't seem to break free of it. Matthew wasn't as sick as the doctors made him out to be, he had first convinced himself. He was a happy, healthy child who played cops-and-robbers with his brother and helped his father cook in the kitchen. His son was sick, he admitted, but he was a normal boy. A normal boy who began chemotherapy, but normal nonetheless. A normal boy who began losing his energy, whose hair began to thin and fall out in clumps, but he was just like any other child. This was Arthur's way of coping. But that day, as he sat there in that crummy gas station in the pouring rain, face streaked with tears, he realized how foolish he had been.

“Dear God,” he breathed, “what’s wrong with me?”

“Nothing is wrong with you,” Francis said softly. The Frenchman pulled him into an embrace, gripping him tighter as he felt the other’s arms come round his neck.

"I'm so sorry..." he rasped, his breath soft against Francis' neck, tears dampening his skin. And somehow Francis knew that apology wasn't just for him.

He shook his head, placing a long, tender kiss atop Arthur's head. “This has been a long few months for the both of us. I couldn't stay upset with you even if I tried.”

Francis had known how stressed Arthur was, watched as he became somewhat distant, burying himself in his work. They had both been under a lot of pressure, trying their best to adapt to the chaotic normalcy that had become an integral part of their lives. Weekly hospital visits, family movie nights, grueling chemotherapy sessions, weekend strolls to the park, piles of medical bills, evening kisses and bedtime stories. A torturous cycle of happiness and despair.

Even now with the reality of Matthew's poor prognosis lying abandoned at Arthur's feet, Francis looked forward to the sandcastles they would build that weekend, looked forward to the ticklish feeling of buckets of sand being dumped onto his body, to the pit-pattering of tiny hands hastening his burial, to the squeals of laughter that would fill the bathroom while he scrubbed bubble gum scented soap into salty blonde heads. And yet he knew that this happiness would soon be stolen from him. It would vanish once he watched an IV go through Matthew's pale little arm, once he watched his son grow lethargic, watched his eyes grow dim. And it would start all over again.

"Who told you that you had to grieve alone?" Francis whispered, frowning when he was answered with another wretched sob. The sound left his heart aching, but relief followed soon after. Because Arthur was finally letting go. Arthur was finally letting him in after months of arguing, of empty smiles and avoidance. He held the trembling Englishman in his arms, the corners of his eyes prickling with tears of his own. He pulled back to look at him once he had calmed, and Arthur bowed his head to hide his puffy red eyes.

"I'm sorry," he said again, hands balled in his lap. "Lately, I...I've not been acting like myself. And I shouldn't have taken out my frustrations on you. Or let them cloud my judgement."

"Look at me, *cher*." He did so slowly, eyes glassy and lashes damp. "I love you. And I don't know what made you think you had to hide these feelings from me. But it ends here. The only way we'll get through this is together, Arthur. This pain is not only yours to bear. So please, don't shut yourself off from me." Arthur nodded his head, but that wasn't good enough for Francis. "Promise me."

"I promise. I do." The two men embraced once more, their bodies melding with one another as they fell into a momentary silence. “He’ll...never be able to see again.” The more Arthur thought about it, the heavier his heart became. Matthew was just barely four. This would devastate him.

Francis was just as concerned, feeling completely helpless as he wondered how they would explain this to their son. How could anyone explain to a child that they would live the rest of their life in darkness? The thought was unnerving. But he knew they would manage somehow. They had to.

“We’ll be right there with him to help him through this.” Taking Arthur’s hand in his own, he placed his own fingers between the crevices, bringing it to his lips. “We need to stay strong,” he said, “for his sake.”

The rain had become a gentle drizzle, and although Arthur still had fears of what was to come, he knew that the decision they had made was right. There was nowhere to go but up.

“Right.”

Prologue, Part II: Peur

⠠⠍⠁⠞⠞⠓⠑⠺

Matthew was supposed to be brave. Like he told his family he would be. Like the superheroes in his brother's favorite TV shows. He thought he could be brave too, just like them. But as Matthew sat there in his wrinkled hospital gown, his family smiling and joking at his side, he began to realize that he was wrong. He was dead wrong. The boy stared down at the thin band around his wrist, recognizing only his name among the other jumbles of letters and numbers that meant nothing to him. He began to feel nauseous, his stomach churning and knotting up on itself.

Alfred's laughter just barely reached his ears, all but drowned out by the sound of his racing heart slamming against his tiny chest. As he looked once more to his family, his breaths short and quick, the façade he'd managed to maintain for so long finally began to crumble. He was scared. Matthew was still too young to know it, but everything—the tests, the appointments, the bloodwork, the chemo—all of it had started with a simple photograph. The picture was just one of those that cemented little Matthew's inevitable place in this hospital bed, with goosebumps spreading along his skin.

The photo had been taken on Christmas Eve, one his parents had taken that night as their twin boys crawled and babbled around the Christmas tree in their matching red and green onesies. If Arthur wasn't holding the camera then Francis was, neither of them wanting to miss the opportunity to document the boys' first Christmas for the family photo album. But it was also a celebration of their becoming a family in the first place. After all, it had been a little over a year since Francis and Arthur brought their sons home, and two years since they'd started the process of becoming adoptive parents, filling out the proper paperwork, giving countless interviews, looking on with baited breath as social workers came to scrutinize every inch of their home, every aspect of their relationship, and every detail of their livelihoods and finances. All of those nerve wracking moments had been worth it to be able to capture each and every moment of that evening, and everyday since they'd become parents. It was ultimately that need to fill their beloved album to the brim that saved Matthew's life.

The disease had revealed itself a few weeks later, in the batch of photos they had developed at the pharmacy. The new parents were so taken by the sheer joy of having more pictures of their little ones that they did not notice it immediately. But when scrapbooking one night, Arthur noticed something strange. In one particular photo, where they'd used flash, Matthew's pupils had turned from black to a glaring, unnatural white. At first, Arthur supposed it was just a developing error, or a simple after effect of the camera flash. But he quickly noticed that Alfred's eyes looked perfectly fine. And then, he noticed that in other photos where they'd left the flash on, it was the same. Ghostly white pupils with Matthew, but never with Alfred, even if they were in the same photo. It was alarming, and after Arthur showed Francis, they scheduled an appointment with Matthew’s physician for the following day, not knowing that it would mark the beginning of a three-year-long battle with cancer.

Retinoblastoma, his doctor had called it, a type of pediatric cancer. It was a frightening word, cancer. Arthur could still remember how his body went numb, how tightly Francis held his hand as the doctor spoke to them. He could feel his husband's hand run cold as they were told of the masses forming in their son's eyes, tumors that threatened to rob him of his sight. And possibly his life. Matthew had been thirteen months old.

By the time Matthew had celebrated his second birthday, the hospital had become something of a second home to him. Monthly check-ups and chemotherapy sessions became routine for he and his family, and with the way he and his brother used to prance up and down the colorfully decorated halls, at times it seemed to be something more of a playground than a children's hospital. But once Matthew's condition began to gradually deteriorate, reality soon set in. The cancer was persistent, but so were his parents.

Matthew was seen by every specialist they could find, and they made sure he had access to every treatment recommended, regardless of the cost. And as Matthew's treatments grew in number and frequency, so too did his parents' fears. Because although Matthew wasn't getting any worse, he wasn't getting any better either. The cancer was becoming resistant to the chemotherapy, they were told, and they needed to "seriously consider other methods of treatment." The boys celebrated their fourth birthday around this time, and the sound of their giggles and the grins on their frosting-smeared faces distracted their parents, if only for a day, from the consultation scheduled for them the next morning.

That consultation had sealed Matthew's fate. There had been a vase of flowers on the doctor's desk that morning. Arthur hadn't been able to stop staring at it. The flowers had been wilting, almost as if they too could sense the mood in the room. As if they'd known how much he and Francis would struggle over the next three months, with their will, their conscience, and their sanity. They listened to the man seated behind the desk, and in his grave monotone he left them with two options: begin Matthew on radiation therapy in conjunction with his chemo, with no guarantee that the cancer wouldn't advance, or eliminate the threat altogether and have Matthew's eyes surgically extracted.

They'd both left the office feeling nauseous. It was a hard pill to swallow, and for a while, neither of them wanted to accept it. Desperate for an alternative, they sought out second, third, and fourth opinions—only to arrive at the same conclusion each time. The second option was best. It was necessary, they were told. And so here the couple sat with their son in the hospital, putting on brave faces for his sake, secretly wondering what would come of tomorrow when their son woke up in a world not of his choosing.

The scent of coffee filled the room as Francis came in from the hallway with two paper cups, and Arthur gave his thanks as Francis handed him one. Matthew fiddled with a loose thread on the hem of his gown as his father placed a kiss on his forehead.

"*Désolé, mon bonheur*," Francis said, taking his seat to the right of Matthew's bedside. "Papa didn't think getting coffee would take so long." His five minute trip to the cafeteria had taken double the time, and though he knew Matthew wasn't due for surgery for another hour, every minute he'd spent away from his son's side had been a minute too long.

Matthew sat up a little, and Arthur adjusted the pillow at his back. "It wasn't long, Papa," he said.

But truth be told, Matthew hadn't been able to stop stealing glances at the door, waiting for Francis' return. He was relieved to have his Papa back by his side. He looked over at his brother, who sat on Arthur's lap in the chair to Matthew's left, envious. Matthew wanted so badly to sit in his Papa's lap; that always made him feel better. He wanted to get out of this funny-smelling bed. He wanted his Papa to hold him close, and to feel the warmth of his cashmere sweater, soft against his cheeks.

But Matthew wouldn't ask. Couldn't ask. Because then, his Papa would surely know his secret. Instead, he looked again to the band around his wrist, ashamed of his own mounting fear. Francis ran a hand through his sparse head of hair, and Matthew sunk back into his pillow, finding temporary solace in his warm smile and gentle touch. He listened while his parents exchanged words, comforted by the sound of their voices.

"Don't tell me there was a line for coffee," Arthur said, taking a sip of the dark slush. He grimaced at the taste.

"The machine was being fixed," Francis answered, chuckling at the face Arthur made. "It was either that or a bag of Lipton."

Arthur laughed softly and took a few more sips despite himself. Bitterness aside, it was definitely better than that rubbish Americans called tea. The caffeine didn’t hurt either, considering it was so early in the morning. "You know me well."

"After eighteen years, I'd hope so," he teased, enjoying the smile on the other's face.

"Daddy, can I have some coffee, too?" Alfred asked, peeking into the cup in his father's hand. "I'm a big boy now, so I can have some, can't I?"

Arthur looked down at the four year old in his lap and chuckled. "You may be a big boy," he said, "but you aren't a grown-up just yet." Alfred's lips formed a small pout and Arthur smiled, fingers smoothing at the boy's cowlick. "But Daddy packed some juice for us last night, remember? Would you like a some juice instead?"

Alfred gasped and gave an eager nod. "Apple juice!" He watched his father bring a hand to his ear, as if he hadn't heard Alfred's answer, and blushed. "Um, please," he added, remembering his manners.

With a nod of satisfaction, Arthur reached into the large duffel bag on the floor next to his feet, filled to capacity with things he hoped would make Matthew's next two days in the hospital as comfortable as possible. Inside were the boys' favorite drinks and snacks, some coloring books and crayons, and extra blankets among other things.

Matthew's favorite stuffed bear sat on top, not nearly as white as it used to be, but loved by its little owner all the same. Arthur stared at the bear, at the boxes of crayons and picture books and little toys that were all packed neatly inside, and felt a chill run down his back. His son was about to have his life changed forever, and this was all he could think to bring. Nothing more than a few playthings.

Arthur hadn't known what else to do. He'd just wanted Matthew to be surrounded by things familiar to him. Wanted Matthew to feel safe, and loved. Because as ashamed as Arthur was to admit it, a part of him was still afraid. Afraid that Matthew would grow to resent him, to resent Francis, for the decision they'd made. The thought was irrational, but Arthur couldn't rid himself of these feelings of doubt and inadequacy. It didn't matter how many books he'd read on childhood blindness, or how many classes he'd attended for parents of visually impaired children. The simple truth was that he was ignorant, inexperienced, and afraid. Afraid of failing as a parent. Arthur had anticipated this day for months, had marked it on his calendar. But to be in this room right now, knowing that Matthew would leave him in an hour, knowing that the only thing he could do was place his trust in these surgeons, was more unbearable than he ever could have imagined.

And yet he smiled through his apprehension as he handed Alfred a juice box, because he'd be damned if he allowed his own uncertainty to get in the way of what mattered most. And that was being the best father he could be to these precious boys in front of him.

"Daddy?" Matthew's voice called out to him.

"Yes?" said Arthur. He managed to take hold of Matthew's hand, even with Alfred wriggling in his lap. "Do you need the loo?" Matthew shook his head and opened his mouth to speak, but hesitated. "It's alright, dear. I'm listening."

Matthew couldn't help but fidget with three pairs of eyes now on him, his parents' full of concern, Alfred's full of curiosity. "Um..." he began, his voice just above a whisper. But Matthew wasn't fast enough, and his stomach answered for him with a long, low growl. His cheeks went red as he clutched his blankets to his stomach, as if to trap whatever new sounds might escape. Nothing else needed to be said.

"Oh, Matthew…" Matthew hadn't been allowed a proper breakfast before surgery, nothing more than a glass of juice. It was hard enough for adults to fast, let alone a young child, so Arthur had anticipated this. "You're hungry, aren't you? It's alright to say so, love."

Matthew looked down at the blankets scrunched between his fingers and whispered, "Yes."

"I'm sorry, sweetheart. I know it's hard. But you've been doing such a wonderful job," Arthur soothed, wanting nothing more than to erase the little frown on his son's face. "Papa and I aren't upset with you."

"Of course not," Francis set down his coffee on the nightstand next to Matthew's bed. "You will be able to eat soon, *mon petit*."

"Uh-huh, Papa said we can get ice cream after your surgery, Mattie," Alfred said with a grin, wanting to comfort his brother as well. He didn't like to see Matthew upset.

"Oh, Alfred," Francis sighed, though he couldn't help but smile; it had lasted this long at least. "It was supposed to be a secret, remember?"

He giggled sheepishly, clasping his hands over his mouth. "Oops."

The ruined surprise didn't come as much of a disappointment to Matthew, especially since ice cream was the last thing on his mind at the moment. But he mustered up a weak smile and laughed along with his brother, all the while trying to ignore the tightening knots in his stomach. The pungent stench of antiseptic and heavy duty bleach lingered in the air, and as he leaned back against the pillows propped behind him, he felt as if he was slowly suffocating.

"Like this little devil needs anymore sweets," Arthur chuckled. "You've just had two cavities filled last month. Ice cream is the last thing you should be eating."

“But Daddy,” Alfred whined, “I brush my teeth really, really good.”

“Oh?” Arthur raised his eyebrows in exaggerated shock. “Do you now?”

“Mmhm. Right, Papa?” He looked over to his father with a small pout, his bright blue eyes full of hope.

“Of course, Papa’s seen it with his own eyes,” Francis said, knowing full well that Alfred's teeth brushing skills, while not as horrible as they used to be, still left much to be desired.

Alfred perked up. "See?" He looked up to Arthur expectantly, who furrowed his brows and hummed in thought. He gave Francis a dubious glance and smirked when he saw the way the man tensed. That looked a bit more like the truth. He looked back down at the child bouncing in his lap with anticipation.

"Oh, alright," he relented. "But if I find any more cavities, then I'll know who to blame, hm?" He looked at his husband again, who gave a nervous chuckle.

"Have a bit more faith in me, *hein*?”

Alfred shouted a little exclamation of victory, swinging his legs back and forth. “What flavor are you gonna get, Mattie? I’m gonna get chocolate.”

By then Matthew was too far gone to even think about an answer to his question. Instead, he sat there staring at his family as they stared back at him, waiting for his answer.

"Mattie?" Alfred was starting to notice that his brother didn't look so good.

Matthew's heartbeat rang in his ears, and his hands, cold and clammy, clutched the clean, white sheets beneath him. His lips began to quiver and yet, all he could do was stare. He looked slowly from his brother and then to his parents, realizing that this day would be the last day he would see their faces.

"Matthew? What's wrong, dear?"

Matthew saw his parents' eyes widen just before his vision clouded with tears. He whimpered as he clamped his eyes shut, wishing the tears would just disappear. But he couldn't hold it in any longer. He let out a loud wail, and Francis scooped him up in his arms. Matthew latched onto him like a vice, gasping between sobs as hot tears streaked down his cheeks.

“Matthieu…” Francis soothed circles into his back, placing a kiss atop his head. “*Papa est ici, mon petit. Chut*…”

Alfred started to cry too, and that only made Matthew more upset. Alfred had never heard such a sound come from his brother. None of them had. And as the two parents slowly paced around the room trying to console their children, it was taking all of their strength to keep their own composure. It seemed like an eternity before the boys finally calmed down, Matthew soon after Alfred. Matthew sighed and snuggled into his father's neck, finding comfort in his familiar scent and the gentle words he whispered in his ear.

"Papa," he hiccuped. "*J'ai peur.*"

He'd said it. He was scared. Matthew knew what would be happening to him today. He knew. His parents had already explained it to him months beforehand, as gently as they could to someone so young. His eyes were making him very sick, and in order to get better he had to let the doctors have them. Matthew thought it was a joke when they first told him. He laughed and told them no, he couldn't do that. Then he wouldn't be able to see, he’d said. But when neither of his parents cracked a smile, Matthew realized. It wasn’t a silly game. They weren't playing pretend. It was real.

Matthew cried for a long, long time. For a straight week he would wake up crying in the middle of the night, and sometimes even cry himself to sleep. Until one day he completely stopped. Not only that, but his mood had improved drastically. Neither Francis nor Arthur had the slightest clue of what caused such change in Matthew, but they were just grateful to see their son laughing and playing again. Francis couldn't help but think back to those long nights of endless tears as he looked down at the quivering child in his arms. And he couldn't bear to see him in such distress a moment longer.

“*Mon chou*,” he said softly, “It’s okay to be scared.” He wiped away a stray tear, his heart aching as more came to take its place.

“I won’t see Papa again,” he whimpered. “Or Daddy, or Alfie.”

Francis sat himself down at the edge of Matthew’s bed, taking Matthew’s hand. “Let Papa tell you something very important. When you wake up, you will not see us. But we will be there.” Matthew’s vision grew blurry with more tears, and Francis brought a hand to his cheek. “Even if you cannot see us, we will be there with you. I promise.”

Matthew sniffled and held his father tightly, resting his head in the crook of his neck. His skin was warm and Matthew could feel the way his chest rose and fell, and the soft thump of his heartbeat. And as Francis placed a long, tender kiss on Matthew’s bowed head, the last of the boy’s tears finally slipped past his lashes. Francis spoke again, and he could feel the vibrations of his father’s voice as he lie his head against his chest.

“Did you know that your ears can see things too?” he asked. Matthew looked up at him and shook his head. “It’s true,” he said. “Would you like Papa to show you how?”

“Mm...mmhm.”

“Alright,” said Francis, “close your eyes. Just for a moment.” Matthew did as he was told, his fingers tightening their grip on Francis’ sweater.

“Good. Now, you can hear Papa’s voice, can’t you?” Matthew nodded.

“And Daddy’s here too.” Francis looked to Arthur as he crossed the room, and they shared a smile as Arthur joined them on the bed, Alfred held close in his lap.

“Me too,” Alfred chimed in, his little red nose the only indication that he’d been crying. He could see that Matthew had calmed down as well, and it relieved him.

Alfred, like so many other children his age, cried over many things, from falling and scraping his knee, to dropping an ice cream cone, to misplacing his favorite toys. But nothing upset him more than seeing his brother in distress, and he always did whatever he could to make Matthew feel better. So now he was going to do just that. He pinched his nose and spoke again.

“It’s okay, Mattie.”

The strange nasally tone made Matthew open his eyes in curiosity, and he found Alfred staring right back at him, looking silly with his nose smushed between his fingers. Alfred simply grinned. “Alfie,” Matthew giggled, “that makes you sound funny.”

“Yeah,” he said, and Matthew laughed again at the strange tone. He let go of his nose and his smile widened. “But I still sounded like me, didn’t I?”

And Matthew smiled, a sweet, gentle smile, not knowing how long his family had been wishing for its return. “Uh-huh.” Matthew looked up at Francis as a hand came to rest on his head. His Papa looked happy.

“That is you seeing us, Matthieu. With your ears.”

“That’s right, love.” Arthur smiled as Matthew looked to him. “Even with your eyes closed, you know who each of us are, how each of us sound. Your eyes aren’t the only part of you that you see with.” Matthew’s eyes widened the slightest bit, and Arthur could see that he’d understood. Francis could see it too, and the two shared a loving glance as Matthew broke into another smile.

“And do you know what else you see with?” Francis asked, and Matthew shook his head as before. Francis responded by nuzzling Matthew’s nose, and Matthew laughed at the ticklish sensation. “With this little nose of yours.”

“My nose?”

“*C'est ça*. It can tell you when Papa’s cooking in the kitchen. Or when the flowers in Daddy’s garden are blooming. Or what kind of bubbles Alfie chooses for bath time. Your nose can tell you so many things, *mon petit*.”

"And we certainly can’t forget these,” said Arthur, taking Matthew’s hand in his own.

“My hands can see too?” Matthew looked down at them in wonder.

“Of course, poppet. With them, you see with touch. Here, let’s close our eyes and try it.”

Matthew was eager to follow the request this time around, and when he closed his eyes Arthur reached down below to the bag on the floor, pulling out a worn little bear. Alfred grinned with anticipation as Arthur put a finger to his lips.

“I have something here, but I’m not quite sure what it could be. Could you tell me what it might be?” All eyes were on Matthew once Arthur placed the bear in his hands. Matthew sunk his fingers into its soft white fur and gasped.

“Kuma!” he exclaimed, his eyes snapping open to find the bear’s button eyes looking up at him. He squeezed his little companion to his chest, smiling contentedly.

“My, my,” Arthur chuckled. “Kuma looks so happy that you recognized him. Even when you couldn’t see him.”

“I saw him with my hands,” said Matthew, hiding a bashful grin behind the bear’s head. His cheeks flushed pink as Francis’ arms enveloped him in a tight hug, his parents showering him with words of praise.

“Matthieu,” Francis said, looking earnestly into his son's eyes, “you must always remember that you are more than just your sight. We love you so much, and we will always be here with you. Understand?”

“Yes, Papa.”

Arthur ruffled Alfred’s hair and placed a small peck against his forehead. "You'll take care of your brother, won't you, lad?"

Alfred couldn’t nod his head fast enough. “Uh-huh, like Cap! He takes care of everyone. I’m gonna be Mattie’s superhero!” he proclaimed, sending a toothy grin his brother’s way. “Mattie’s not sad anymore.”

Matthew shook his head, flashing a smile of his own. "I'm gonna get chocolate too."

Hero

Chapter Summary

> Matthew hated how transparent he was when it came to his brother. And yet, he was grateful. Because Alfred always knew what to say.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

⁘

Matthew could hear footsteps, and he knew exactly who they belonged to. They were loud and clunky. They were fast too, as if the person was in a hurry. But above all else, they were completely obnoxious. Matthew did his best to ignore the commotion as he continued to get ready for the day ahead, but it only became louder with each passing second. It was hard to concentrate, and Matthew was getting a little peeved. He couldn't help but feel sorry for the floorboards, though. They didn't deserve such abuse.

"Mattie! Mattie, where are you?" Alfred shouted as he ran down the hall, worn high tops pummeling the hardwood floor beneath him. He had just finished convincing his father to let him borrow the spare car, and he just had to tell his brother the good news.

"In here," he called back distractedly, his voice echoing off the pale blue bathroom walls.

Alfred came to a halt at the end of the hall and peered into the bathroom to see his brother in front of the mirror. He was bent over the sink and the water was running, so Alfred figured he was probably brushing his teeth or something. "Guess what?" he said excitedly, leaning on the siding of the bathroom door.

"What?" Matthew asked, turning slightly to face him.

Alfred's mouth clamped shut when he saw only one eye staring back at him, and he burst into laughter. "*Dude*," he snorted. "Is that your new back-to-school look? Looks great."

Whenever Matthew wasn't wearing one of his eyes, the empty one was usually squinted, like he'd attempted to wink but gave up halfway through. It wasn't an uncommon sight, but in a case like this, when Alfred wasn't expecting it, it was damn hilarious.

Matthew scoffed as he flipped off the tap and began to gently dry said missing eye with a small towel, smiling. "Har har. Lucky for you, I've decided not to steal your thunder today. Maybe tomorrow."

Alfred grinned, leaning against the door frame. "Thanks for the warning. I gotta step up my game before then."

Matthew's little smile morphed into a little smirk. “You're welcome. It's the least I could do,” he said, inserting the phony eye beneath his eyelid. Alfred snorted again and Matthew did too. Him? Outshine Alfred? Yeah. As if. He pushed the eye snuggly into place.

His eyes were handcrafted, completely identical to the real pair he had lost. He'd gone through many pairs as he grew older and had to be refitted, but they always maintained the unique color he was born with. He struggled to put them in himself the first few times, his hands clumsy and awkward at such a young age. But now, twelve years later, it was second nature. The prosthetics were purely for aesthetic purposes, and although they would never make Matthew see again, they brought him that much closer to being “normal,” and that was all he wanted. He blinked a few times and Alfred grinned as those familiar violet-blue eyes stared back at him.

“So, what were you trying to tell me?” he asked, passing by Alfred to return to his room.

“Oh!” He followed behind his brother, his excitement quickly returning. “You won’t believe this. Dad said he’d lend me the Accord!”

Matthew was visibly shocked. “Wow, really?” He sat on his bed and put his shoes on one after the other. Once Alfred had received his driver’s permit last summer, he’d been begging Arthur nonstop to drive that old car. Arthur would always refuse.

“It’s against the law for a minor to operate an automobile without a parent or guardian present,” the Englishman would say, quoting the state law word-for-word. Alfred would whine about Arthur being “lame,” and complain about how Francis said it was ok. Arthur would then ask Alfred if he wanted his father to accompany him to school. Because that was the only way he would let Alfred drive, with him in the passenger seat. Alfred would hastily decline and then reluctantly give up, and then the cycle would repeat itself.

“Yup,” Alfred said proudly. “Pops finally convinced him to quit being so anal.”

Matthew laughed. “Alright, Papa.”

“Well, c’mon,” he said, jingling the prize in his hand. “You’re in charge of the radio.”

“Oh…well, um,” Matthew gave a weak smile. “Actually, Al, I was just gonna walk today,” he said. He felt bad for turning Alfred down, especially when he’d finally gotten permission to use the car. He really did want to ride along with Alfred, but he couldn’t. Not today.

“Huh?” Alfred was utterly confused. “But it’s raining!” He watched Matthew zip up his backpack and throw it over his back.

“Exactly. It’s just a light drizzle.” He shrugged, smiling sheepishly. “I think it’d be nice.”

Alfred stared at his brother in disbelief, and then looked down at the keys in his hand. He looked up again at his brother, who had grabbed an umbrella from inside his closet, and once

more to his precious keys. He let out a long, agonized groan.

It was orgasmic, the smell of rain. Matthew stood there motionless on the street corner, listening to the gentle rhythm of raindrops meeting his umbrella. He loved rain. He loved the sound of it against his window pane, the sound it made as it hit the pavement, when it gathered into puddles and whirled through gutters on the street sides. He loved the way it felt on his skin, and the way the cool drops dampened his hair. But what he loved most was its smell. He smiled and inhaled deeply, allowing the scent of fresh, dewy grass and damp earth to fill his nostrils. There was nothing else like it.

“Dude,” his brother groaned at his side, “this weather sucks.” He frowned at the traffic signal at the other end of the street, silently pleading for its permission to cross. He hadn’t planned to spend his morning stuck in the pouring rain. With a pout on his face, he wiped at the droplets gathering on his lenses and adjusted the soggy backpack slung over his shoulder.

Matthew rolled his eyes, a small smirk on his lips. He was sure there was no one who could exaggerate more than his brother. “Stop whining, Al,” he said, wincing as a nearby car blew its horn. He held back a laugh as Alfred leapt away from the curb to dodge splashing water, mumbling about rude motorists and lousy weather. “It's not that bad.” Sure, it had become a little more than just a drizzle, but it wasn’t like it was a thunderstorm or anything, Matthew had reasoned. Not that he didn't like thunderstorms, too.

“Ugh,” Alfred continued to grumble, “Dad was finally gonna lend me the car, but no. You had to feed your weird rain fetish and walk.”

“W-What?” Matthew sputtered. “I don’t have a fetish!”

Alfred snorted. “Yeah, whatever you say, Mattie.”

“I don’t!” he insisted. “It’s not a *fetish*,” he said, grimacing as the word left his mouth. “It’s an appreciation. And it’s not weird,” he hastily added in defense of himself.

Alfred shrugged, smiling at the indignant look on his brother’s face. “Not much of a difference.”

“There’s a *big* difference!”

“Whatever, bro,” Alfred snickered, looking ahead to find that the signal had yet to change. He sighed wistfully, eyeing the passing cars with envy. “All these people,” he said, “all nice and dry in their cars. That could’ve been us, you know.”

“I said you didn’t have to come,” Matthew said matter-of-factly, unaffected by the other’s childish antics. He squawked when Alfred’s arm came around his neck, and nearly dropped his cane to the ground. He frowned slightly in annoyance, fighting back a smile when his brother’s obnoxious laugh reached his ears.

“Yeah right! Since when have we not walked to school together? Besides, since Dad gave me the ok, I can take the car another time.” Alfred gasped suddenly, and quite dramatically,

startling Matthew. “Are you trying to say you don’t like walking with me anymore? Do you hate me?” he asked, feigning distress.

“Shut up,” Matthew laughed, shoving him away as best as he could with both hands occupied. He heard a sharp bleeping noise from the automated signal at their side, indicating that the two boys could finally cross the street. He wasted no time making his way to the next stretch of sidewalk and Alfred quickly followed suit, laughing all the while.

Alfred was right though, Matthew thought, smiling to himself as he listened to Alfred ramble on about nothing in particular at his side. They had always walked to school together, ever since they were grade-schoolers. It was a short walk, ten, fifteen minutes at most, but it was special to Matthew. It was on that sidewalk that they jumped and stomped in puddles in their squeaky new rain boots, and argued over who had made the biggest splashes. On that very same street side they used to creep like snails, Matthew begging Alfred to keep an eye on him so he didn’t step on any cracks; else he’d break their parents' backs. Sometimes they rushed home, eager to see what kinds of snacks their father had waiting for them. Other times they dragged their feet, dreading the hours they would spend completing that night’s homework. It was how they bonded, walking down that road together everyday. The fact that Alfred was willing to pass up his first parent-free day behind the wheel to walk with him meant a lot to Matthew.

The roaring engine of a passing school bus reached Matthew’s ears and he frowned. It wouldn’t be long before they reached school. Matthew loathed going to school. It wasn’t that he didn’t like to learn; it was quite the opposite. It was the environment that he couldn’t stand. It wasn’t until junior high that Matthew began to understand the way the world saw him.

Teachers and other adults would coddle him as if he was incapable of doing anything himself. He socialized with other children, but friendships were few and far between. It only became worse once he started high school. His brother fell right into place, making friends left and right and joining the school’s wrestling team. But Matthew’s social life, on the other hand, was nonexistent. He often found himself jealous of his brother, of how charismatic he was and the effect he had on people, of how he didn’t have to deal with people feeling sorry for him, or have people talk to him like he was stupid. He felt guilty, selfish even, for having such feelings when Alfred did nothing but support him, but he just couldn’t help it. Feelings of dread and anxiety began to take hold of him, and his legs felt like lead. He would have given anything for a chance to turn back around.

“Dude, what’s with the grandma legs?” Alfred teased, realizing that Matthew had started to drift behind him.

“H-Huh? Oh.” Matthew quickened his pace, returning to the other’s side with a soft apology.

The meek reply caught Alfred off guard. Curious, he peered at Matthew from under his umbrella and noticed his head had slumped forward, Matthew's long hair making it difficult for him to make out his brother’s expression. His body language was off though, Alfred could see that much.

“Hey,” he said in a voice that was uncharacteristically quiet. “What’s wrong?”

Matthew's head snapped up at Alfred's question and he quickly shook his head, smiling. "Nothing," he said, "I'm just a little tired. I couldn't sleep much last night," he explained, laughing nervously. "You know, first day and all." It wasn't a total lie. It *had* taken a while for Matthew to fall asleep the night before. It was hard to catch Zs when all he could think of was how agonizing the next day would be.

Alfred stared at Matthew's smiling face, his eyes narrowing with skepticism. The lenses of his glasses were smudged and a little fogged over, but he could see that sham of a smile clear as day. And he didn't like it.

Matthew heard his brother hum in what sounded like understanding, and finally released the breath he'd been holding. He felt a little guilty for lying, but he didn't need Alfred worrying about him. He did that enough already. He heard Alfred chuckle then, but it was odd. It was a dry laugh, short and breathy. Matthew raised an eyebrow.

"What?" he said, turning his head to face the other.

"You're usually really great at lying, but that," he said, shaking his head, "that was really lame."

Matthew's mouth opened and closed multiple times before he could force out a reply. "I wasn't-"

"Yeah, you were. So, what's really going on?"

Matthew gripped his umbrella tighter, facing ahead. "Nothing's 'going on.' I'm just tired, alright?" His annoyance was evident in his voice, and his answer was firm. He was annoyed at himself more than anything, for letting his negative thoughts ruin his good mood.

Had Matthew answered with such conviction the first time, Alfred surely would have believed him. But after catching Matthew in a lie, he just couldn't shake the feeling that something was up. He stayed silent for a while, listening to Matthew's cane rumble against the ground as he thought to himself. He spoke again once they reached another crosswalk.

"You're…not really excited about school today, are you?"

Matthew froze. He swallowed thickly, biting his lip. Since when did Alfred get so good at reading him, he wondered. Still, he played dumb. "Why do you say that?" he asked, his soft voice barely audible over the cars zooming by.

Alfred sighed. "C'mon, you know why. You were totally fine a few minutes ago. We were just walkin' like we normally do, and then you start moping."

"I wasn't moping…" he said. Or was he? "I think."

"Mattie…are there people messing with you?" Alfred asked after a silence.

Matthew's eyes widened, his brows furrowed in confusion. His brother's voice had taken on a completely different tone. "W-What?"

“Are people messing with you?” he repeated, gripping Matthew’s shoulder. “Giving you a hard time?”

Matthew shook his head vigorously. “Of course not!”

Alfred wanted to press him further, ask who these bullies were. He wanted to know their names, what year they were in, what made them think they could mess with his brother without him knowing about it. But he didn’t. The puzzled expression on Matthew’s face was answer enough. There were no bullies; he was telling the truth. He released Matthew’s shoulder, the tension in his body slowly disappearing. He was relieved to find that his suspicions were wrong, but he still didn’t know what was eating at his brother, and it bothered him.

“Then…what is it?” Alfred asked again, frowning deeply.

Matthew almost felt like laughing. Almost. It was ironic, he thought, that Alfred would think other students picked on him. To be picked on, he first had to be acknowledged, and that wasn’t exactly Matthew’s strong suit. Plus, he was handicapped. No one made fun of the handicapped. Not legitimately, anyway. Matthew had gotten enough pity in his short sixteen years to last him the rest of his life. Bullying was the least of his worries. Still, he appreciated his brother’s concern. It made him feel…important.

“I’m just…nervous,” he admitted. “Meeting new people is…well, it’s kind of a chore. I don’t exactly click with people as well as you do,” he said sheepishly, which was just a less depressing way of saying that his peers preferred to talk to people that weren’t him.

“Aw, don’t sweat it, bro!” Alfred said, relieved to hear that it was just a case of the nerves. The signal they’d been waiting on turned bright green and the boys crossed, Alfred doing his best to avoid puddles. Matthew winced as his counterpart gave his back a few hardy slaps. “Besides, everyone gets a little nervous on the first day, you know? Don't worry. You'll be fine, Mattie.”

Matthew smiled, starting to feel at ease. Maybe this year would be different than the last. There was no way of knowing for sure, but Alfred’s optimism was contagious. “Yeah, I guess you’re right.”

“Of course I am,” he said with a grin. “I’m the—”

“Hero. Yeah, I know,” Matthew laughed.

Chapter End Notes

> If you're curious about how prosthetic eyes function, or what a socket without an eye looks like (it's nowhere near as unsettling as it sounds, believe me), there are plenty of great live visuals you can find online :)

What's Your Sign?

Chapter Summary

Who exactly *was* this guy?

⠠⠓⠑⠗ ⠝⠁⠍⠑ ⠺⠁⠎ ⠎⠁⠍⠁⠝⠞⠓⠁⠲ ⠠⠍⠁⠞⠞⠓⠑⠺ ⠙⠊⠙⠝⠞ ⠅⠝⠕⠺ ⠍⠥⠉⠓ ⠁⠃⠕⠥⠞ ⠓⠑⠗⠂ ⠃⠥⠞ ⠋⠕⠗ ⠞⠓⠑ ⠞⠺⠕ ⠍⠊⠝⠥⠞⠑⠎ ⠓⠑ ⠙ ⠎⠏⠕⠅⠑⠝ ⠞⠕ ⠓⠑⠗⠂ ⠓⠑ ⠙ ⠇⠑⠁⠗⠝⠑⠙ ⠞⠓⠁⠞ ⠎⠓⠑ ⠺⠁⠎ ⠁⠝ ⠕⠝⠇⠽ ⠉⠓⠊⠇⠙ ⠁⠝⠙ ⠓⠁⠙ ⠁ ⠏⠕⠕⠙⠇⠑ ⠝⠁⠍⠑⠙ ⠠⠏⠁⠞⠗⠊⠉⠊⠁ ⠷⠁ ⠝⠁⠍⠑ ⠺⠓⠊⠉⠓ ⠞⠕ ⠓⠊⠍⠂ ⠎⠕⠥⠝⠙⠑⠙ ⠍⠥⠉⠓ ⠞⠕⠕ ⠓⠥⠍⠁⠝ ⠋⠕⠗ ⠁ ⠙⠕⠛⠂ ⠃⠥⠞ ⠓⠑⠽⠂ ⠺⠓⠁⠞ ⠙⠊⠙ ⠓⠑ ⠅⠝⠕⠺⠾⠀ ⠠⠓⠑⠗ ⠙ ⠁⠇⠎⠕ ⠇⠑⠁⠗⠝⠑⠙ ⠞⠓⠁⠞ ⠎⠓⠑ ⠺⠁⠎⠝⠞ ⠞⠓⠑ ⠃⠑⠎⠞ ⠉⠕⠝⠧⠑⠗⠎⠁⠞⠊⠕⠝⠁⠇⠊⠎⠞⠲ ⠠⠍⠁⠞⠞⠓⠑⠺ ⠺⠁⠎ ⠞⠗⠽⠊⠝⠛ ⠓⠊⠎ ⠃⠑⠎⠞ ⠞⠕ ⠎⠞⠁⠽ ⠕⠏⠞⠊⠍⠊⠎⠞⠊⠉⠂ ⠓⠑ ⠗⠑⠁⠇⠇⠽ ⠺⠁⠎⠂ ⠃⠥⠞ ⠺⠊⠞⠓ ⠞⠓⠑ ⠺⠁⠽ ⠞⠓⠊⠝⠛⠎ ⠺⠑⠗⠑ ⠏⠗⠕⠛⠗⠑⠎⠎⠊⠝⠛⠂ ⠕⠗ ⠗⠁⠞⠓⠑⠗⠂ ⠝⠕⠞ ⠏⠗⠕⠛⠗⠑⠎⠎⠊⠝⠛⠂ ⠊⠞ ⠺⠁⠎⠝⠾⠞ ⠁⠎ ⠑⠁⠎⠽ ⠁⠎ ⠓⠑⠾⠙ ⠓⠕⠏⠑⠙⠲ ⠠⠓⠑ ⠎⠁⠞ ⠏⠁⠞⠊⠑⠝⠞⠇⠽ ⠁⠞ ⠓⠊⠎ ⠝⠑⠺⠇⠽ ⠁⠎⠎⠊⠛⠝⠑⠙ ⠙⠑⠎⠅⠂ ⠓⠊⠎ ⠓⠁⠝⠙⠎ ⠎⠓⠕⠧⠑⠙ ⠊⠝⠞⠕ ⠞⠓⠑ ⠋⠗⠕⠝⠞ ⠏⠕⠉⠅⠑⠞ ⠕⠋ ⠓⠊⠎ ⠋⠁⠧⠕⠗⠊⠞⠑ ⠓⠕⠕⠙⠊⠑⠲

Her name was Samantha. Matthew didn't know much about her, but for the two minutes he'd spoken to her, he'd learned that she was an only child and had a poodle named Patricia (a name which to him, sounded much too human for a dog, but hey, what did he know). He'd also learned that she wasn't the best conversationalist. Matthew was trying his best to stay optimistic, he really was, but with the way things were progressing, or rather, not progressing, it wasn't as easy as he'd hoped. He sat patiently at his newly assigned desk, his hands shoved into the front pocket of his favorite hoodie.

"You're gonna be fine," Alfred had said once they'd arrived at his first class of the day, seeing Matthew off with a wave and a smile. And his brother was right; he was perfectly fine. The girl across from him, however, seemed to be in a bit of a daze.

"So, uh…"

He held back a sigh as the fidgeting girl fell silent once again. She had started to shuffle her feet against the floor, which he guessed was her way of coping with being in her current situation. Talking with him, that is. She seemed restless, and her efforts to keep conversation were beyond pitiful. It was painfully obvious to Matthew that the girl was uncomfortable, and he was the reason why. Even so, Matthew made sure to give a small, encouraging smile as she forced herself to speak.

"What's your favorite color?" she asked. As the last word left her mouth she gasped, clasping a hand over her mouth. "Oh wait," she groaned inwardly, "you don't understand colors, right?"

Much to Matthew's disappointment, this first day was turning out to be just as excruciating as all the rest. The sophomore had fallen victim yet again to the dreaded ice breaker, and he wasn't sure how much more of this he could take. Talking to complete strangers about meaningless aspects of their lives was awkward enough for Matthew, but listening to them trip over their words as they struggled to interact with him was the icing on the cake.

Matthew smiled gently, shaking his head. "No, it's fine. It's—"

"I swear I'm not trying to be funny!" The girl insisted, throwing up her hands defensively at her chest. "I'm sorry for offending you! I-It's just that I'm not really used to, um," she trailed

off. She nibbled on her bottom lip and fiddled with the hem of her skirt, trying to think of what more she could say. “Crap,” she sighed in defeat. “I’ve never really, you know—”

“It’s red.”

The girl tilted her head to the side, raising an arched brow. “Huh?”

“My favorite color,” Matthew repeated. “It’s red.”

“Oh…” she said, laughing nervously. She played with her pin straight hair, the bangles she wore jangling slightly at her wrist. “So…you *do* know what colors look like?”

He nodded. “Yeah.”

“Oh…”

The confusion in her voice was readily apparent, but she made no attempt to question him, and so Matthew chose not to elaborate. After all, they were supposed to be talking about dull, ice breaker-y things, like their hobbies and pets they had at home, not his knowledge of the color spectrum. But Matthew had done this countless times before, and he was used to being overshadowed by his shortcomings. It was a bittersweet sort of experience, the ice breakers. Sure the conversations were awkward and stilted, but he was socializing. It was forced socializing, but socializing nonetheless. Just as he opened his mouth to ask his next obligatory question, his teacher demanded the attention of the classroom, bringing the discussions to a halt.

“Alright, class,” she began. “We’re going to switch it up once more.” She smirked slightly as a chorus of groans rang throughout the room. “I like that enthusiasm.” She turned to the chalkboard and grabbed an eraser, wiping away the directions she’d written a few minutes earlier.

“This will be our last go around, and I won’t be assigning you partners. But-” She held up a finger, narrowing her eyes. “I want you to go find somebody that you *haven’t* spoken to yet. And don’t think I don’t know which of you already know each other,” she added, “because I do.” She seated herself on the edge of her desk and crossed her legs, smiling playfully. “I’ll be watching closely. Now, start chatting.”

Matthew hadn’t even had time to blink before the girl across from him scurried away, leaving a trail of sickly sweet perfume behind her. He sighed softly, neither saddened nor surprised by her hasty departure. Besides, he already knew. He knew that had the girl not been forced to talk with him, then she most certainly would have avoided him. It was what everyone did. Not because he was strange or unpopular, or anything so superficial, but because he was who he was. Everyone knew who he was. Teachers, students, people at the grocery store—he was basically a celebrity. Matthew Bonnefoy,"the blind kid."

It was impossible not to spot him in the halls, with his thin white cane gripped firmly in one hand and his textbooks in the other. Every morning he would make his way to class, listening as students pushed and shoved at their friends, telling them in hushed whispers to move out of his way. A small side-step and a polite apology were about the only acknowledgements he

would receive from his peers on a day-to-day basis. Matthew was far from oblivious. Even without seeing their faces, he knew. He knew that he, or more specifically his blindness, made people uncomfortable. Students always seemed so uneasy around him, hesitant to speak to him. Matthew knew he shouldn't let it bother him. But he also knew that when he walked into school each morning, it was as if he was barely even there. And that was something he would never be able to ignore.

Matthew shook his head, snapping out of his troubled musings. He had more awkward socializing to do, and he certainly couldn't do that while he was sitting off in the corner like some loner. He mentally scolded himself for spacing out and reached for his cane that he'd set against the wall. But then a voice reached his ears among the buzz of steady chatter, and he froze.

"I take it ice breakers aren't your thing?"

Matthew slowly sat back in his seat, turning to face the stranger. The voice was deep, obviously male, with an accent he couldn't quite place. Something European maybe? It held no familiarity whatsoever, which caught him off guard, but he managed to stutter out a response.

"O-Oh, well I—"

"I'm Gilbert," the other said, the smile he wore one of mischief. "Gilbert Beilschmidt." He stole a nearby chair from an empty desk and sat in it backwards, settling himself comfortably at the opposite end of Matthew's desk. "Mind if I hide back here with you?"

Matthew sat there with his mouth slightly open, completely stupefied by the fact that someone had come up to him of their own volition, introduced themselves, and taken a seat across from him. To say it was surreal would have been an understatement.

Gilbert chuckled, leaning forward on the hind legs of his chair. "I know my sheer awesomeness is pretty hard to handle, but it's never shaken a guy silent before."

"Uh, sorry," Matthew said hurriedly, a light flush rising to his cheeks. "N-No, I don't mind." He wondered if he should mention that he wasn't actually hiding, but quickly decided against it as the truth was sort of embarrassing. "I'm Matthew," he added. "Bonnefoy."

"Bohn-fwah," Gilbert repeated, smirking to himself. It didn't sound as delicate coming from his own lips. "Fancy."

"Not really," Matthew answered, face still warm from the sudden attention. "Just French."

"Is there a difference?"

Matthew cracked a smile. "Maybe not," he said.

Gilbert watched as Matthew gave a sort of shrug, eager to find out just how many more of those little grins he could coax out of his new partner. "So you're French, then?"

"Ah, no, just my dad," he replied, hair moving slightly as he shook his head, and Gilbert would admit he was a little too focused on how bouncy it was. His gaze fell back to Matthew's face. "I was born and raised here in the states."

"And your mom?"

Below his desk, unnoticed by Gilbert, Matthew ran a warm, sweaty palm along his jeans. He still couldn't believe this was happening. For some strange reason, unlike the last few people he'd spoken with, this guy actually sounded genuinely curious about what he might say. This...was an actual conversation. He licked his lips, his nerves morphing into something less cautious, more hopeful, and he parted his lips to speak.

He definitely wasn't going to make things awkward and give the whole spiel about how he was adopted, how his Canadian birth mother was a teen who wasn't ready for even one child, let alone two at once. So instead, with a shy smile, he said, "My other dad is from England."

Gilbert broke into a grin. "Two dads, huh? Awesome." He watched Matthew's smile grow to show even more teeth than before, felt his face heat, and was immediately convinced that he should do that more often.

"Yeah, thanks," Matthew said, "they really are."

"And just so you know," Gilbert said, shifting in his seat to rest his head in his hands. "I'm not saying that for brownie points. It's nice knowing that could be me one day. A husband, maybe a kid."

Matthew wiped his hand on his jeans again and felt his cheeks go warm, slipping both hands into his front hoodie pocket. God, his hands were even worse now, so gross, so clammy. He hadn't been expecting this guy to blurt out his sexual preferences so casually, and to a total stranger at that. But even as he questioned how Gilbert could be so open to someone he'd just met, he felt his mouth opening to reply.

"Yeah," he said softly, "me too."

There was a short silence between them then. It couldn't have been more than a second. But it spoke for itself. Gilbert hadn't been expecting him to say that. But honestly, neither had Matthew. He didn't just go around telling random people who he was sexually attracted to, but somehow, right here, he had. Seriously, *how* had he just done that? There was no explanation for it other than...this random person sat across from him.

"Cool," Gilbert said with a chuckle that suddenly made the room feel too hot for Matthew.

"Um," Matthew said, ignoring his rising body temperature, "what about you? Your parents, I mean."

"Just my dad," Gilbert replied, "My mom isn't in the picture anymore, divorce and all."

"Oh, I'm sorry..."

Gilbert waved a hand. "I'm not, so no reason for you to be. That's life, right?" Matthew hummed in agreement.

"By the way, I wanted to ask..."

"Yeah?"

"Your accent," Matthew said after a pause. Although it wasn't very thick at all, it was still somewhat noticeable on certain words and it left him curious. "Can I ask what it is?"

Gilbert laughed, finding Matthew's politeness, however excessive, to be endearing. "I'm German. I was born in Berlin, but my old man moved us here when he got relocated for work. I guess it's been almost ten years now since we moved, now that I think about it."

"Us?" Matthew repeated. "Do you have siblings?"

"A little brother, he goes here too. Name's Ludwig," he said, smirking as his chest swelled with pride. "Smart little shit could've skipped his sophomore year if he wanted. You?"

"Oh, I have a brother too," he replied.

"Oh yeah? He go here?"

Matthew nodded. "His name is Alfred. He's my twin, actually."

"Huh." Gilbert chuckled. "Two of my best friends are twins too."

"Really?"

"Mmhm. But you'd never know it when they're apart. One's night and the other's day."

"I guess you could say that about me and Al too," Matthew mused aloud. "But even when we're together I think it's pretty obvious who's who. Only one of us wears glasses."

"Yeah?" Gilbert looked to the wall next to them, where a thin white cane leaned against it. Then he looked back at Matthew with a smirk. "Guess you just forgot to wear yours today, huh?"

At first, Matthew could only respond with silence. Because as astonishing as it was to have met another student who felt comfortable enough to approach him, it was even more astonishing to discover that the guy felt comfortable enough to *joke* with him. He brought a hand to cover his mouth as a huff of laugher escaped.

"I got you to laugh," Gilbert said, though it sounded like he couldn't believe the feat himself. He grinned then. "Wanna bet I can't do it again?"

"Not particularly," he laughed again, though this time it was a nervous one. He found himself blushing all over again when he felt Gilbert lean in closer. He could tell from the way his desk wobbled, and the slight squeak of Gilbert's chair.

Gilbert hummed and narrowed his eyes, carefully studying the soft-spoken boy in front of him. "Matthew, huh?" This was the first time Gilbert had ever so clearly seen his face. The only time he would see Matthew was in the crowded halls, but he would always walk with his head slightly down, and it mildly annoyed Gilbert for reasons he couldn't quite understand.

But now, he could see everything. His facial features were softer than he'd expected, not necessarily feminine, but gentle, complementing his wavy, honey blonde hair. But the kid's eyes were what struck him most. They were a soft blue color, a shade so odd that they appeared to give off a purplish hue. They didn't seem to be focused on him, or on anything in particular for that matter, but Gilbert just shrugged it off, knowing that it would be exceptionally unfair (and stupid) to expect eye contact from a guy who couldn't even see him. He grinned, satisfied that he could now put a name to the strangely cute face.

"I like it," he said, setting his chair safely back on the ground. "It has a hell of a lot more character than 'the blind kid' if you ask me."

"Oh. That." Matthew laughed to himself. "Thanks." It was odd to hear it come from someone so directly; it was only ever said when people thought he wasn't within earshot. "Thought" being the keyword. It was nice to know that someone else was as tired of the stupid alias as he was. He found himself smiling again, not knowing that Gilbert was keeping count.

"So, Matthew," Gilbert said, his voice barely above a whisper. He watched Matthew lean in a bit to hear him better, and a crooked smile stretched across his face. "You come here often?" he asked.

Matthew's brow crinkled in confusion, thrown off by both the question and the sudden change in the other's voice. It was...smooth, sultry, and definitely not the same voice he'd heard just seconds earlier. "What?" he laughed sheepishly, rubbing at the back of his neck.

"What's your sign?" Gilbert continued, "Some say the zodiacs can make or break a relationship."

"U-Uh…" It was obvious that the boy was joking, but Matthew still found himself struggling to find his voice, not exactly sure how he should respond. He absolutely hated how hot his face was getting. He was startled when Gilbert broke into a fit of laughter.

"Oh man, you should see your face," he cackled. "Pinker than a newborn's ass."

Matthew tried to hold back another smile, but failed miserably. How could he with a comparison as ridiculous as that? "That's a first," he said, bowing his head in an effort to hide his face. Who exactly *was* this guy, Matthew thought, flustered and yet amused all the same. And what in the world had possessed him to use the cheesiest pick-up line known to man on an unsuspecting stranger in the middle of a 10th grade English class?

"Tell me that wasn't the most awesome ice breaker you've ever heard," he said, grinning lopsidedly.

"Well," Matthew laughed, "it...*was* pretty creative."

“Can't say I disagree,“ he said, giving himself a congratulatory pat on the back. "It's just one of the perks, you know."

"Perks?"

"Of being this awesome."

Matthew’s lips curled up at either side as he gave a breathy laugh, marveled by how unapologetically arrogant the other was. He could just hear the smug delight dripping from every word that left his lips and picture the expression of satisfaction on his face. His aura reeked of confidence and certainty, from the firmness of his voice to the way he had practically claimed the opposite half of Matthew’s desk as his own. It was coming off of him in waves, reminding Matthew of just how weak his own presence was. It was somewhat intimidating to the young introvert and yet captivating at the same time. He found himself leaning forward just a bit more.

Gilbert straddled his chair, scoffing as he thought of all of the students he’d talked with over the class period. “I mean, how many times is someone gonna ask me what my favorite food is or how many pets I have? And I couldn't give even a quarter of a shit about some stranger's birthday, so I have no idea why everyone's been asking for mine. If we have to do this every year, we might as well make it fun, you know?”

Matthew wanted to laugh at how offended Gilbert sounded. “It does get old,” he said, chuckling. “I think three or four people asked me what my favorite animal was.”

“You’re joking.”

He shook his head. “My last partner asked for my favorite color.”

“Well, shit, then I guess all we’re missing are the crayons and graham crackers.” He smiled when he heard Matthew laugh again, and decided that it was a sound that he rather liked. "But I'm kinda curious now."

"Hm?"

"What *is* your favorite color?"

Matthew made a face, a mixture of confusion and amusement. "Weren't we just making fun of those questions?"

"We were," Gilbert replied with a slight shrug, grinning back at him. "But you can't go around telling everyone else and then not tell me. Remember who you're talking to here, Matthew." His smile grew wider as yet again his voice became a whisper, the other boy leaning in a second time. "Gimme the goods."

Gilbert was gifted with another laugh, though not without a head shake to accompany it. "Red," Matthew answered.

"Red, huh?" Gilbert made a humming noise that had Matthew wondering if his answer really was that interesting. "That's a pretty loud color, *ja*?"

"Yeah, I guess?"

"Hmm. *Rot," he said again, tongue rolling at the back of his throat. "Maybe you're a little feistier than you let on." He smirked as he watched the boy's face change hue. The very hue he claimed to like most. And Gilbert had to admit, he wore it well. "You don't have to hold back around me, you know. I can handle it."*

"I'm not holding back anything..."

Yeah," Gilbert snickered, "we'll see."

"I'm *not*."

"Are you getting *feisty* with me, Matthew?"

Matthew's face grew hotter, partially from embarrassment, partially from hearing his name yet again on this strange boy's tongue. He honestly wasn't used to other students calling him by name, and to hear it come from Gilbert not once, but three times over, in that teasing, mischievous tone of his, was...weird. It was weird, but he also kind of...liked it?

"N-No," he answered hurriedly. He cleared his throat, his expression one of skepticism. "Are you saying you can read someone's whole personality just by knowing their favorite color?"

"Are you saying you can't?"

"Alright then, what's *your* favorite color?"

"Hey now, not everyone can do what I do," he said, wanting to laugh at the way Matthew quirked a brow. "I'm a tough one to crack. Don't bite off more than you can chew."

Matthew hid another laugh behind his hand. "I think I'll be ok."

"Don't say I didn't warn you." His smile softened as he noticed the other had begun to relax a little more, fingers no longer playing with the strings of his hooded sweatshirt. And was it just him, or was this kid a little closer than before? Not that he was complaining. Gilbert swore that his eyes were *violet* from this close up. Not that he was staring at them that long to have noticed. He quickly spoke before the overdramatic silence turned into an awkward one. "Prussian blue."

"Blue?"

"*Prussian* blue," he corrected. "The Prussian part's kind of important. And by 'kind of,' I mean extremely."

"Ok?" Matthew laughed. "And what makes *Prussian* blue different from regular blue?"

"It's darker. Richer. You see it and it just screams power."

"Power, huh?"

Gilbert nodded. "I mean, it's named after the badass Kingdom of Prussia. Power, prestige, perseverance. At least that's what I see when I look at it."

It was Matthew's turn to scrutinize his partner's taste in shades, and he hummed before repeating, "Power, prestige, perseverance."

"*Genau*." Gilbert blushed as Matthew sent him a confused look, reminding him he was the only one who knew what he'd just said. "Exactly, I mean."

"Oh." Matthew smiled. "Somehow it fits you. Your...personality."

"And what's that, *Matthew*?"

"Very, um..."*Oh god, he did it again*, Matthew thought, his cheeks going warm for the umpteenth time. "Bold."

"Heh. Sounds about right." Gilbert looked at the boy across from him, at that face that he'd only ever seen from afar until today. And he knew that it wouldn't be the last time he spoke to this kid. Not if he could help it. “Now, I’ve got a question for you that I can guarantee you haven’t been asked today.”

Matthew was rather curious now. “Ok,” he said after a moment’s pause. “Sure.”

“You free this Friday after school?”

Matthew froze, stunned. He was anticipating another cheesy pick-up line or maybe a not-so-serious question about his favorite superhero or what he aspired to be when he grew up, something to that effect. But he definitely wasn’t expecting what he’d just heard, and it blindsided him. He hadn’t realized how humiliatingly stupid he must have looked until he heard what Gilbert said next.

“You ok?” he asked, a brow disappearing into his platinum blond bangs. The boy looked like he had seen a ghost, blue eyes wide and mouth ajar.

“Y-Yes, I’m fine. Sorry,” he said, smiling sheepishly. “I was just thinking of something. Friday you said?”

“Yeah, I’ve got a club I’m staying after for,” he explained, “You should come. I mean, unless you’ve got plans that day. If you’re busy, that’s cool. Don’t worry about it."

“No,” Matthew replied, shaking his head. He said it only after a considerable pause, as if he had to think about whether or not he would be available. The last thing he wanted to do was come off too excited, and ruin what he was already sure was too good to be true. “I don’t have plans.”

The truth was that Matthew *never* had plans, at least not with people who weren’t his family. He was *always* available. Nearly every afternoon he sat off in his favorite corner of the school’s library, listening to audio books or doing homework as he waited for his brother to finish wrestling practice. On rare occasions (usually when the library was closed) he would

sit in on Alfred's practices, but he really preferred not to. Listening to obnoxious teenage boys pummel each other to the floor wasn't exactly relaxing.

"Awesome. Then you should come. Only if you want to."

"Ok, I'll come," he said, smiling more openly than Gilbert had seen up to that moment. It was still a modest little smile, but somehow a little less timid than the ones before it. "What's the club called?"

"That's a secret," he replied, laughing at the confused look on Matthew's face.

"But how can I find it if I don't know the club name?"

"It's pretty hard to find regardless," he said with a shrug. "And I know you've never been in the general area let alone the room. But that isn't your fault. Only a certain group of students know about it. But don't worry," he soothed. "I'm gonna take you there personally. We need to meet up somewhere after school."

"Alright." Matthew took a few seconds to think. "Hm, how about in front of the library?" he suggested. It was at the center of the school and was easy to get to from any area of the building.

"Library it is then." Gilbert glanced at Matthew as he nodded in agreement and noticed that his cheeks were still stained pink. It was kind of cute. He wondered if he was still flustered over the awesomely clever ice breaker he'd used. The way he'd reacted was also kind of cute, and he was pretty sure that he wanted to see it again. He leaned back against the empty desk behind him, resting on his elbows. "Now that we've got that settled," he said, "maybe you can finally answer my question."

"Huh? What question?"

Gilbert smirked devilishly. "What's your sign?"

"W-Wha—Stop asking that!" Matthew demanded, his face reigniting. It sounded like more of a plea. "The ice is broken!" His words were drowned out by Gilbert's bizarre cackling, and Matthew soon found it impossible not to join in.

His name was Gilbert. Matthew didn't know much about him, but during the short time he'd spent in his company, he'd learned that Gilbert was like no one he'd ever met. He'd also learned that Gilbert was an excellent, if not expert, conversationalist. He was brash in his actions, bold with his tongue. He was cocky, playful, and even obnoxious at times. He demanded attention, demanded his voice be heard. He and Matthew couldn't be any more different, but Matthew couldn't help but be drawn to him. And as he headed home that afternoon chatting along with his brother at his side, he realized that that day was the first time in a long time that he'd actually felt…normal. And it was all because of Gilbert Beilschmidt.

The Fucking Club

Chapter Summary

> *Oh*. Well. At least Matthew was getting a warm welcome. New names, new faces, and perhaps...new friends?

⠠⠿⠒⠄ ⠠⠒⠒⠄⠒⠄ ⠠⠄⠿⠿ ⠠⠒⠿ ⠒⠒⠿

The hallways were always so quiet after school. It was a sort of quiet that Matthew usually appreciated, but right now it did nothing but make him more anxious than he already was. He released a nervous breath as a janitor walked by, pushing his wheeled trashcan and humming an obscure tune as he swept the floor. That wasn't who he was waiting for either. He felt so silly standing there at the library's entrance, listening obsessively to people walking by, and wondering if the next person would be *his* person. He hadn't been waiting but for a few minutes, and so he had to remind himself to be patient.

In an attempt to distract himself, he filled his mind with other thoughts, like what kind of club he was going to and why it was a secret. The more that Matthew thought about it though, the less he cared. He didn't really care what kind of club it was. All he cared about was that someone had been kind enough to invite him. He found himself smiling as he leaned against the brick wall behind him.

"You that happy to see me, Matt?" Gilbert asked as he approached the other. He snickered when Matthew's head snapped in his direction, the smile on his face disappearing as a soft gasp escaped his lips. "I can't blame you," he said, shrugging. "I have that kind of effect on people. You know, being me and all."

"Gilbert," Matthew laughed shyly, slightly embarrassed that he hadn't heard the boy walking his way.

"The one and only," he replied, smirking to himself. "You ready?"

"Yeah," he said with a slight nod of his head.

Gilbert noticed his fingers were busy playing with the drawstrings of his hoodie like they'd been a few days before, noticed a light blush on his face. Something had him flustered, and sure Gilbert had just caught him off guard, but it seemed to be more than just that. A sudden thought came to him, and he went to speak because as polite as Matthew was, he doubted he would mention it if Gilbert didn't first.

"Oh, shit, sorry, is 'Matt' alright?" he asked. "Or maybe you're a full name kinda guy? Cause I can respect that."

"Huh?" Matthew was taken aback by the question as he hadn't even thought twice about the nickname when Gilbert said it. "Oh, I don't mind, really. Matt, Mattie, either is fine."

Gilbert hummed with interest, smirk playing at his lips. "Mattie, huh?" he said. "That's pretty cute."

"Is it?" Matthew laughed softly, shrugged. "It's what my brother calls me, so I'm pretty used to it."

"Well, tell him I'm stealing it," he said, grinning at the way Matthew laughed again. "C'mon." He gave Matthew's shoulder a little nudge with his own. "Let's get going."

Matthew was so distracted by the tingle left by Gilbert's touch that it took a moment for him to realize that he still hadn't asked Gilbert what he'd meant to earlier. "W-Wait," Matthew said as Gilbert began to walk.

Gilbert stopped, looked to Matthew, eyes falling from his face to his slightly outstretched hand. His hand quickly fell back to his side and Gilbert frowned curiously. "What's wrong?"

"I, uh, was just wondering if you could..." he hesitated momentarily, "lead me?"

"Of course I will, Mattie," he laughed. "That's why I'm here. I won't walk fast, don't worry."

"Uh…well, what I mean is," Matthew attempted to elaborate, and Gilbert looked questioningly at him as he folded his lengthy cane, collapsing it onto itself and into the size of a ruler. "Could you hold out your arm?"

"My…arm?"

Matthew blushed as he slipped the cane's strap onto his wrist. "So I can hold on to it?" He groaned inwardly, wishing that he could say the request in a way that didn't sound so awkward. "I-I don't know where I'm going so… it'd be easier to follow if I could just…"

It was never this complicated with Alfred; Alfred would just offer his arm, Matthew would take it, and they'd be on their merry way. But Gilbert didn't know proper guiding etiquette and Matthew hadn't expected him to. Even so, he hadn't anticipated it would be so cumbersome to explain.

Oh, Gilbert thought, *this* was what had him so flustered, not the nickname thing (although Gilbert was still glad that he'd asked about it, because while "Matt" was indeed smooth on his tongue, "Mattie" was just cute as all hell, and dammit if he wasn't going to make good use of it). He was thoroughly enjoying the way Matthew's face had reddened, but decided that it would be downright cruel to let him ramble on any longer. He'd gotten the picture after the first explanation.

"Alright," he chuckled. "I gotcha. Here," he said, extending his arm so that the stammering boy could take hold.

Matthew reached out and gently gripped his arm just above the elbow, his fingers resting against the cottony fabric of Gilbert's sleeve. His nose twitched as he caught a generous whiff

of whatever fragrance Gilbert was wearing. He guessed it was either that, or the lingering scent of his preferred laundry detergent. Either way, Matthew thought it smelled nice. He licked his lips, his eyes lowering bashfully to the floor.

“Thanks.”

“Yep,” Gilbert said as he began to walk, Matthew one step behind him. He looked over his shoulder and smiled. “Look,” he laughed, “you obviously know a lot about being blind, and I know jack shit, so don’t be scared to set me straight, alright? You need me to do something, stop doing something, whatever, you let me know.”

“Okay,” Matthew laughed, feeling himself relax. He was so used to people walking on eggshells when they spoke to him, mincing their words, carefully picking and choosing what they would say next so as not to offend him. Gilbert did no such thing, and Matthew didn’t mind it in the slightest. He liked it. A lot.

Facing forward again, he raised a curious brow as a thought crossed his mind. “How the hell did you make it here before me, anyway? My last class is just the next hallway down. Didn’t mean to make you wait.”

“Oh, no it’s fine,” Matthew insisted, shaking his head. “I wasn’t waiting long at all. And to be fair,” he said with a guilty smile, “I took the elevator down. You know, blind kid privileges.”

Gilbert laughed. “I almost forgot about those things.” They were hidden in the strangest areas of the school. He figured they were set up that way to keep students who didn’t actually need them from abusing them. Those who could find them still did so anyway when staff wasn’t looking. “I guess you use them a lot?”

“Actually, no. I can walk and use stairs just fine, so I usually avoid them. But I was afraid I might get held up in the halls once classes let out, and I didn’t wanna keep you waiting so…I chose the quicker option.”

“Yeah, end-day crowds are a bitch to get through,” he said as they turned a corner. “Maybe you should let me hitch a ride with you next time.”

Matthew hummed as if in thought and then smirked. “If you can get a cane or a wheelchair, we may be able to work something out. Maybe borrow some crutches from the nurse.” Gilbert laughed that one-of-a-kind laugh of his, and Matthew heard a classroom door slam shut as they passed, giggling when Gilbert scoffed about “losers” not appreciating his “awesomeness.”

The two spent a few more minutes making their way through the hallways before they finally arrived at an isolated door, Matthew mumbling an apology when he collided with Gilbert’s back. Gilbert stared nostalgically at the worn door, its face covered in all kinds of amateur grade pencil graffiti. On the wall off to the side was a plaque containing the numbers “001” in big bold print. A wide grin crept onto his face as he looked over to the boy on his arm.

"It’s a good thing you said you can handle stairs,” he said, grabbing the handle and slowly opening the door. “’Cause we’re about to go down a lot of ‘em.”

By the time the two reached the bottom, Matthew was wishing his sense of smell wasnt as keen as it was. It was cold and the air damp, smelling strongly of mildew.

“Gilbert, where are we?” Matthew asked, grimacing as he breathed in the stale air. He’d wanted to ask the moment they’d started descending the staircase, but became too preoccupied with keeping his balance. The stairs were freakishly steep and there were indeed many of them; the last thing he wanted was to lose his footing and put the both of them in the hospital. “It smells horrible.”

“The basement,” he chuckled, his eyes adjusting to the dingy room’s dim lighting. “And that smell, also basement. It’ll get better once we leave this room.”

“Basement?” Matthew repeated, utterly confused. He followed in Gilbert’s footsteps, noting how the floor beneath his feet had suddenly changed. It was a little bumpy, like concrete. “The school has a *basement*?"

Gilbert smirked as he opened the door leading out of the room, making sure to hold it open until Matthew had reached it himself. “Like I said, secret.”

Gilbert hadn’t lied; as the door closed behind him, Matthew noticed that the smell had gotten significantly better and the air was less damp. Still, he found himself slightly disoriented when the floor at his feet changed once again, back to the smooth tile he was familiar with. He was dying to know where they were. As if right on cue, Gilbert explained.

“See, not a lot of people know it, but there’re classrooms down here,” his voice echoed off the cinderblock walls. “But they haven’t been used for actual classes in years. Now most of the rooms are just for storage, chairs and tables and all that. But one of them, the one we’re going to, is open to kids after school.”

“Wow,” Matthew breathed. “That’s amazing…So, this is a hallway we’re walking through?”

Gilbert nodded, humming affirmatively in response. “Exactly like the ones above us. Only a lot dirtier,” he said, eyeing the thick layer of dust on the ceiling lights and floor. “If they make anyone clean down here, it sure as hell isn’t often.”

Matthew was about to ask Gilbert how he knew about such a place when his guide came to a stop. Luckily he caught himself before he ran into him a second time. He’d have to talk to Gilbert about warning him the next time around.

“Ok, we’re here.” He turned to Matthew, who released his arm, and smiled. “I want you to meet some friends of mine while we’re here.”

“Alright.” Matthew was ready, but he couldn’t ignore the tightness in his stomach. He was only seconds away from walking through that door and meeting complete strangers. By some miracle he’d met Gilbert and they had gotten along amazingly, but he doubted the dodgy forces of the universe would be giving him any more breaks. As Gilbert opened the door, the murmur of steady conversation reached Matthew's ears, and he took a deep breath.

A few heads turned as the boys entered the classroom, but quickly turned back after confirming it wasn't a teacher. Gilbert strolled to the large desk at the front of the classroom to address the teacher seated behind it. Matthew followed closely behind him, cane in hand. The man had his back turned to the classroom, eyes glued to his computer monitor. On the monitor's display was a video clip; a pair of kittens entertaining themselves with cardboard boxes. Gilbert had to stifle a laugh.

Glancing around at his surrounding space revealed that the man hadn't changed even a little from the last time Gilbert had seen him, an assortment of tiny knick-knacks of the feline variety littering his desk. He rolled his eyes fondly and cleared his throat loud enough for the other to hear. He grinned when the teacher looked back, fixing him with a level stare.

"Gilbert," he said, his voice mellow. "I see you finally made it." He wheeled back in his chair, settling behind his desk before fishing through his drawer for a pen.

"You think I'd skip out, Mr. K? After all we've been through?" Gilbert tried to sound as hurt as possible.

Mr. Karpusi cracked the slightest smile, scribbling down something on the paper in front of him. "You wouldn't be the first. Who is this?" he asked, looking to the quiet boy at Gilbert's side. Noticing the boy's cane, he frowned, wondering why on earth someone so seemingly harmless was standing in his classroom, and with Gilbert no less.

"This is my friend, Matthew," he said. "He's not scheduled to be here, but I asked if he'd keep me company today."

Mr. Karpusi nodded. "Nice to meet you, Matthew."

"You too, sir," he said with a polite smile.

The teacher looked back and forth between the boys, his lazy gaze settling suspiciously on the more familiar of the two. "Gilbert is very lucky to have such a nice friend."

Matthew smiled awkwardly, not really knowing how he should respond.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Gilbert asked, narrowing his eyes. "You trying to say I'm not nice?" He scoffed when the teacher only smirked in response.

"You remember the rules, don't you? Do I need to remind you how things work here?"

"*Ja ja, alles klar*," Gilbert sighed. "It hasn't been that long since I came here."

"Alright," he said, holding back a yawn as he wheeled himself back to his computer. "Have fun."

Gilbert looked back and scanned the rows of desks behind them, smirking when he located his friends. "C'mon, Matt. We're heading to the back."

"O-Ok." Matthew followed after him closely, squeezing through the crowded desks.

“Hey, losers,” Gilbert said as he approached his two friends, slipping into a seat across from them. Matthew took the one in front of Gilbert, still slightly nervous.

“Gilbert, you’re here!” One of them beamed and turned around to look at the other, who appeared to be sulking. “Gilbert’s here! What did I tell you?”

“I have eyes. I can fucking see him,” the other grumbled, glowering at Gilbert’s smug face.

“Aww, was Lovino asking about me, Toni?”

“Oh, you fucking wish,” Lovino snapped, arms crossed defiantly at his chest. “I couldn't give two shits about you. Bastard.”

The boy Gilbert called “Toni” grinned. “He was sure you weren’t gonna show up.”

“Well, fret no more.” Gilbert gave a dramatic bow.

Lovino scoffed. “Only an idiot like you would show up late. You’re just lucky Karpusi doesn’t give a single fuck. That cat obsessed freak.”

Gilbert rolled his eyes. “Which is exactly why I took my sweet time getting here. Quit your whining. I’m here, aren’t I?”

Matthew was completely amazed, if not a little more anxious. That was four expletives and three insults in under a minute from a single person. He wondered what exactly had put this guy in such a sour mood. Strangely enough, Gilbert seemed to be completely unfazed by his increasingly colorful vocabulary. The other guy sounded rather nice, though.

“Now, if you’re done with your little hissy fit, it’s time for introductions,” he said, motioning to Matthew.

“Guys, this is Matthew. Matthew, this guy here is named Antonio. He’s from Spain, but he moved here young like me.”

“If you wanna just call me Toni, that’s alright too. I learned kind of early on that the shorter you make your name, the less chance someone’s gonna mess it up.”

Lovino gave a sudden scoff, or maybe it was a laugh. “It wasn’t your first name people fucked up, it was your other two. You’re the damn weirdo who went by your full name all through first grade.”

Antonio shrugged, looking sheepish. “That’s how I was taught to introduce myself when I was still learning English. I didn’t know it was weird.”

“What’s your full name?” Matthew asked, curiosity getting the better of him.

“Antonio Fernández Carriedo.” He chuckled. “Guess it *is* kind of a mouthful for little kids.”

“Yeah, no shit.”

“Anyway.” Antonio smiled brightly, teeth impossibly white against his golden brown skin. “I recognized you as soon as you came through the door. Glad to finally meet you, Matthew,” he said.

“You too,” he said with a shy smile.

“This is Lovi,” Antonio then said, smiling at the way Lovino’s cheeks reddened.

“It’s *Lovino*,” he grumbled and ran a hand through his hair, an auburn shade as fiery as his temper. “Vargas. These assholes make me wish I’d never left Italy.”

“Like you had a choice,” Gilbert scoffed. “You and Feli were like six when your gramps moved here.”

“Like that makes a difference…”

“So you’re really going with the lie that you hate us?”

Lovino shrugged. “If thinking I’m lying makes you feel better about yourself, then so be it.”

“Hey, Toni, didn’t Lovino cry when he missed my eighth birthday party sleepover?”

“What? I did not!”

“Oh yeah,” Antonio said, “it was because you had to get your tonsils removed the next morning, remember, Lovi? You were pretty upset cause we promised to eat all the piñata candy together that night.”

“Shut up. Bastards.”

“Uh,” Matthew said, in a way that he hoped wasn’t as awkward as he felt. Which was pretty awkward considering. “Well, nice to meet you, Lovino.”

“Yeah, same to you. Finally got to see Kid Moses in the flesh.”

“Huh?”

Gilbert snickered. “It’s what he called you every time we saw you in the halls.”

“I wish people would move the fuck out of my way like they do when you walk by,” Lovino grumbled. “It’s like in that stupid bible story. Like you’re parting the Red Sea or some shit.”

Matthew laughed at that. That actually made him sound pretty cool. “I guess I never really thought about it.”

Lovino simply shrugged. “Matthew it is then.” He eyed Matthew’s meek face with skepticism. He looked so…out of place. “How’d you even get in here?” he asked. “Potato breath got you in here, didn’t he?”

“Uh,” Matthew laughed nervously, “you mean Gilbert?” He was seriously starting to question Gilbert’s definition of the word “friend.” He nodded. “Yes, he, um, invited me.”

Lovino frowned, looking at Matthew like he’d said the sky was green. “He *what*?” He looked to Gilbert, narrowing his eyes. “You *what*?”

He shrunk back in his seat a little. “H-Hey,” he said, raising his hands defensively. “Don’t look at me like that.”

“You *invited* him here?” Antonio asked. Even Antonio was giving him the wary eye, and it was then that Gilbert knew that he’d have to come clean.

“Alright,” he said with a defeated sigh. “I was gonna have to say it sooner or later. Let me explain.”

Matthew tensed, sensing how the mood had suddenly changed. “Explain what?”

Gilbert looked to Matthew, frowning apologetically at the uneasiness written all over his face. “Matthew,” he said with a sheepish grin, “this isn’t exactly...a club.”

“Wait, wait, wait.” Lovino perked up in his seat. “You told him this was a *club*?” He barked out a laugh and Gilbert glared at him.

“It’s…it’s not?”

“Look, this is detention, kid. But hey, if that isn’t what he told you it was, then welcome to the fucking club!” he laughed, ignoring Antonio’s warnings to quiet down.

“D-Detention?” He frowned in disbelief. “But…everyone’s talking.” He was pretty sure that wasn’t allowed in detention. And as far as he could tell, no one was busy writing essays about what they did wrong. He was pretty sure that happened in detention, not that he’d ever been before. But these sorts of things were what generally happened, weren’t they?

“Well,” Antonio laughed. “It’s a special kind of detention.”

“Didn’t you hear?” Lovino sighed as he caught his breath, his laughing fit at its end. “It’s a *club* now.” He looked over at Matthew, who looked completely lost, and shook his head in pity. He then looked to Gilbert and snorted. “What’s the name of our club, huh? Are you club president?”

“Fuck off,” he growled and swiftly flipped him the bird, his cheeks a pale pink hue. Bringing his attention back to Matthew, his expression softened. “Look, I like talking to you, Matt.”

It was so straightforward, and completely unexpected. Matthew couldn’t even find the words to respond. He simply sat there, eyes wide and eyebrows raised. Gilbert only chuckled.

“It was only for a few minutes,” he said, shrugging, “but I had fun. And I never have fun doing that ice breaker shit. That's why I asked if you’d come here. I knew I was gonna be stuck in this room today and, well, I thought it’d be less of a drag with you here.”

“Me?” Matthew finally found his voice. It was barely above a whisper, but it was there. He knew he was blushing, hard. But for some strange reason, he found himself not caring. He was still in somewhat of a daze.

“Yeah, you,” Gilbert laughed. “Don’t sound so surprised. I couldn’t exactly ask you to come to detention with me so…I got a little creative. Sorry.”

“So, this is how you make friends?” Lovino huffed out a breathy laugh. “In-fucking-credible.”

Gilbert smirked, rolling his eyes. “You know, you seem more pissy than usual today,” he said, his tone laced with faux concern. “Is something wrong?”

“You’re the reason I’m even *in* this fucking room, you bastard!”

“Heh, yeah because I *made* you fall asleep.”

“If you had just shut your big fucking mouth, I wouldn’t be here, you damn kraut muncher!”

Gilbert laughed again, chin resting casually on the palm of his hand. "Yeah, well, kraut's fucking delicious, so you'll have to come up with something better than that, *Schatz*."

“Ok, ok,” Antonio said, standing between the bickering pair. “Let’s all just calm down.”

“Shut up,” Lovino snapped, albeit with less volume. “This is your fault too.”

Antonio smiled sheepishly, returning to his seat when he was sure the other had calmed down. “It’s only an hour. It’ll be over before you know it.” He looked up front and sighed with relief when he saw Mr. Karpusi hadn’t budged from in front of his computer.

“Señor Boyfriend to the rescue once again.”

Lovino said nothing, but he did send a bird Gilbert’s way; it was only fair that he should reciprocate.

Matthew suddenly laughed. It surprised everyone, even Matthew himself. He cupped a hand over his mouth, slightly embarrassed, but the chuckles kept coming. He couldn’t pinpoint exactly what was so funny to him; it was a combination of things. The fact that he’d actually believed Gilbert’s “secret club,” the realization of what Mr. Karpusi meant when they’d spoken a few minutes earlier, it was all beginning to add up. And the way Gilbert and Lovino were going at it, well…he’d have to admit that was pretty funny too.

“Sorry, I don’t mean to laugh,” Matthew said, flustered at having become the center of attention. They all had gone silent; he knew they were looking at him.

“Whatever.” Lovino waved a dismissive hand, slumping back in his seat. “I’m just wondering why the hell you aren’t strangling this bastard right now. You could be home right now, but instead you're sitting in detention. Aren’t you pissed?”

“Well…” Matthew trailed off, eyes falling to the floor.

Gilbert frowned slightly, knowing that Matthew had every right to be angry with him. He waited with baited breath, hoping that he hadn't already ruined a friendship before it truly began. He tensed as Matthew's eyes shifted in his direction, and he almost missed a breath as Matthew flashed a cheerful smile.

"No, I'm not upset or anything. But you know, you didn't have to lie, Gilbert. I still would've come."

It was now Gilbert who was suffering from verbal constipation. He was still enthralled by the smile gracing the other's lips. Those warm blue eyes were on him, and that smile, it was so genuine. His chest suddenly felt light. It wasn't at all the kind of reaction he'd been expecting. "You…really?"

"Yeah," Matthew said, nodding. "If you had just told me it would be like this, I would've still come with you. This doesn't feel like detention at all. I still can't really believe it," he laughed.

Gilbert grinned. "I know it doesn't feel like it, but that's because Mr. K is up there at that desk. His only rules are that we talk quietly and watch for the door. I wouldn't have asked you here if it was any other teacher."

Antonio looked at Matthew, curious. "So, you don't mind staying after school for this?" It was strange, he thought. That someone would be so willing to spend their Friday sitting in a classroom after school.

"Yeah, are you a masochist, kid?" Lovino was of the same opinion. "Why the hell would you want to come to this shithole if you could just go home?" he asked, incredulous.

"Uh, no, I'm not," Matthew said, blushing. "I don't really mind because I stay after school nearly everyday anyway," he explained. "Alfre—er, my brother has practice after school most days and we walk home together. So, I usually wait for him in the library until he's finished."

"Oh, well that makes sense." Antonio nodded in understanding.

"Tch. Well, you can be happy that idiot brought you in here. I won't," Lovino scoffed.

Gilbert groaned out something that Matthew couldn't understand, and Lovino's following words echoed Matthew's own thoughts.

"I don't know what the fuck you just said. I don't speak kraut."

Matthew wouldn't have quite worded it that way, however.

"Um…" All eyes settled on Matthew again as he spoke up again. "Can I ask why you guys got detention?" He hoped he wasn't out of line. It really was none of his business, but..."I mean, it's only the first week of school."

"You wanna know why I'm in here with these idiots? I'll tell you why."

Gilbert sighed. “Here we go.”

It didn’t take long for Matthew to learn that Lovino was a rather passionate storyteller. There was a lot of cursing and insults flying everywhere, but he eventually got the full story. According to Lovino, the three of them were written up on the very last day of school while the class was watching a film. The lights were off, and Lovino had decided to take a nap, while Gilbert and Antonio opted for talking between themselves. The two ended up bursting into uncontrollable laughter, and when the teacher came to the back of the class to scold them, she found Lovino sleeping. All three of them were given slips that day.

Matthew hummed in understanding. “So that’s why you’re in detention this week. You were written up on the last day.” He then frowned. “What kind of teacher would do that?”

“A fucking sub.”

“Sub?”

“Yep,” Gilbert said, nodding as he leaned forward on his desk. “It was a substitute. Our actual teacher had left a week earlier.”

“I had a feeling she didn’t like us very much,” Antonio said, frowning. “I think that’s why she wrote us up. Lovi and I had never been written up until that day.” He laughed, shrugging nonchalantly. “I guess there’s a first time for everything.”

“Stop sounding so happy when you say that,” Lovino pouted.

Matthew didn’t bother to hide his amusement as he listened to Lovino grumble at Antonio under his breath. He couldn’t believe that he was making friends in after school detention of all places, in a room he never would have stepped foot in had he not met Gilbert. He couldn’t remember the last time he’d felt so happy meeting new people. It almost felt like he was dreaming.

Lovino glanced over at Matthew, sighing in disappointment when he realized that Matthew had no intentions of injuring his asshole of a friend. "Don't say I didn't warn you, kid," he said, a smirk on his lips. "He'll get on your last fucking nerve."

Antonio laughed, shaking his head. "He's only kidding."

"I don't kid."

Gilbert couldn't even be bothered to reply to Lovino's childish comments. Not while he was still admiring the smile on Matthew's face. “Hey,” came Gilbert’s voice, unusually soft.

“Yes?”

“Sorry. For, you know, lying.” He sighed softly, rubbing at the back of his neck. “I just… really wanted you to come.” Matthew just laughed, the sound airy and light, and Gilbert began to wonder why his mouth had gotten so dry.

“It’s ok,” he said, cheeks tinged pink. “I'm glad I came.”

Patchwork

Chapter Summary

> Alfred didn't know how to feel, and Matthew didn't know what the hell Alfred was talking about.

⠠⠽ ⠠⠺⠑⠇⠇⠲⠲⠲

“That’s him.”

“Yes, it is.”

“What is he doing here?”

“You ask me that as if I would know.”

“Don’t be a smart ass, Braginsky.”

Alfred rolled his eyes as his teammate let loose a tiny little giggle, a childlike smile tugging at his lips. It used to genuinely disturb Alfred that so innocent a sound could come from a guy as big and brawny as Ivan. But after having no choice but to spend nearly every afternoon around him, what with him being co-captain and all, it no longer bothered him as much as it used to. It was still annoying as ever though, even more so because what he was currently looking at was no laughing matter.

As he stood outside of the library peering none too discreetly inside via the display window, he frowned, his eyes narrowing with fierce scrutiny. His brother was inside as per usual, waiting for him like he always did. But he wasn’t alone. *He* was there, the German kid with the freakishly pale skin and glaring red eyes. Alfred had been seeing a lot of his face lately, particularly because he’d made a strong habit of loitering around his brother’s locker. And around his brother in general.

The first time Alfred had seen Gilbert, he’d had to do a double take. Though his albinism was quite striking at first glance, it wasn't really Gilbert himself that surprised Alfred, but more so who he was with. Right at his side was Matthew. It was the strangest thing, to see his brother on the arm of a total stranger. Matthew rarely asked for assistance from strangers at school, especially considering he was more than familiar with the layout of the building. So when Alfred saw him walking down the hall clinging to the unfamiliar boy, he was completely baffled. And if he was honest with himself, a little bothered.

The feeling nagged at him as the weeks passed, as Gilbert became a part of Matthew’s mornings and afternoons, and by association, Alfred’s mornings and afternoons. In the mornings before class, Gilbert was there. Occasionally, Alfred saw Matthew in the halls

between periods; Gilbert would be there too, right next to him. And now as Alfred stood in front of the library, there he was once again. He seemed to come out of thin air, this kid, and now Alfred couldn't go but a few days without seeing him. Gilbert was a friend, Matthew had said, and Alfred had shaken his hand as they were introduced, smiling cordially as he looked for something, anything in those strange red eyes that would confirm his suspicions. He would find that something soon. He was sure of it.

"It is not very nice to spy on your brother, Fredka," Ivan said, smirking with amusement.

"Dude, c'mon. It's not even like that," he said, breaking his concentration to glare at Ivan. "And don't call me that," he mumbled under his breath.

Ivan hummed, pleased with the warm red glow that had spread across Alfred's face. "You did not seem to mind last Friday night," he said, clasping his hands innocently behind his back. "In fact, if I remember correctly, you rather enjoyed it. Yes?"

"Fuck you."

"I would rather you," Ivan purred, smile as smug as Alfred's face was red.

"J-Just shut up." Alfred didn't need to be reminded of their sporadic flings; every time he saw Ivan and his big, stupid nose and his girly pink scarf it was all he could do to *not* think about them. About how that nose would nuzzle against his neck, about how that scarf felt between his fingers as he tugged on it in a blissful haze. It was embarrassing to think about how just a year ago he would've given anything to punch the Russian square in his jaw, the same jaw he now placed kisses on when no one was looking. He pouted, avoiding the other's taunting gaze. "Quit distracting me."

Ivan looked to the table inside where the two boys sat beside each other, laughing and smiling about something he didn't care to know about. Then he looked back to Alfred, who was snooping just as intently as before. He sighed softly. "If this is not spying, then what is it?" He grimaced slightly as a thought ran through his mind. "You are reminding me of my little sister."

Alfred winced himself, remembering the few unpleasant run-ins he'd had with said sister. "It's not spying," he insisted. "I'm just…checking up on him, ok?" He turned to Ivan, crossing his arms at his chest. "Don't you know anything about this guy? Anything? I thought you said you had a class with him once."

Ivan shrugged. "He is very arrogant. And rather obnoxious."

Alfred huffed. "Why would Mattie wanna be friends with a guy like that?"

"Hm, I often ask myself the same question," Ivan said, laughing when Alfred shot him a dirty look. "Now, come," he said, pulling the blond by the sleeve of his jacket as he started to walk away. "This is silly."

Alfred followed after him reluctantly, retrieving his car keys from his back pocket. "I need to know who this guy is."

“And I am sure you will find out sooner or later.”

“Yeah, well, waiting’s just not gonna cut it.” Alfred sighed, looking back worriedly over his shoulder as they left. “Not when Mattie’s involved.”

Gilbert was so close. So close that Matthew found it difficult to concentrate on anything other than the fact that Gilbert was so close to him. As he ran his fingers across the pages of his book, the palpable words brushing past his fingertips, he had to remember to breathe. Each time he did, he was met with the crisp, clean scent of the other’s cologne. He breathed deeper, then exhaled, blood rising to his cheeks.

“So, this is an L, right?” Gilbert asked, squinting at the mess of tiny dots scattered across the pages of Matthew’s book. He leaned in slightly, tapping at a spot on the page. “This one. By your pinky.” His arm was draped lazily over the back of his friend’s chair, and he pursed his lips as he tried to make sense of what he was looking at.

Matthew gulped as Gilbert’s breath tickled his neck, the sharp scent of peppermint chewing gum still lingering on his tongue. His ears tingled as the other’s voice found its way inside, just before the heavy thumping in his chest came to drown it out. He suppressed a shudder as he asked Gilbert to repeat himself, and Gilbert chided Matthew for ignoring him. It was so embarrassing to Matthew, the way his thoughts became scattered when Gilbert was near. The irony in Gilbert's words did little to relieve the knots in Matthew's stomach.

At Gilbert’s repeated question he shook his head, only just realizing how shallow his breaths had become. “No,” he said, his voice coming out a lot quieter than he’d intended. He cleared his throat softly. “That’s a V.”

“Oh, c’mon,” Gilbert pouted, “How is that a V?” He glared at the group of dots as if they’d insulted him. Looking over at the blond seated beside him, he smiled fondly. “I really don’t know how you do it, Mattie.”

He cracked a smile, shrugging modestly. “I didn’t learn it in a day.”

"So, you're gonna teach me, right?"

"What? Braille?" He laughed softly. "So you can forget it all right after?"

Gilbert smirked, stealing the book from the other's hands. "Is that a challenge?"

"Gilbert!" Matthew shouted under his breath. "Give it back!"

"Nah," he said, grinning. He casually flipped through the pages sprinkled with text he couldn't decipher, not so much interested in the book as he was in Matthew's reaction. "I think I like yours better."

Matthew rolled his eyes, smiling despite himself. "So you can read it now?" He felt around the table for the stolen novel, hand roaming across the worn cherry wood. "Use your own."

He stiffened as he felt Gilbert's arm reach around him, abandoning his chair to rest on the table. Gilbert snickered as he placed the book between them, leaned in closer. Matthew didn't even know it was possible for him to be any closer than he had been. He felt the knots in his stomach returning, his breath leaving him. "Can't we share?"

There was a beeping at Matthew's side, and Gilbert pulled away, glancing at his watch to check the time. Matthew sighed silently with relief, heart beating so fast it seemed weightless.

“Ten till four,” he said. “Guess our day’s about done.”

“W-Wait, it’s already that late?” That couldn’t have been right. Had they really been there for an hour? Matthew could’ve sworn they had much more time left. He groaned. “We were supposed to be studying.”

Gilbert shrugged. “And we did.”

“Barely.” He sent a pout Gilbert’s way, which Gilbert found adorable. “I told you we wouldn’t get anything done if we kept getting distracted.” His frown deepened when Gilbert laughed. “I’m serious, Gil! No more distractions. We have to stay focused next time.”

“*Ja*, okay,” he drawled. “But you like my distractions. Admit it.”

Matthew fought back a smile as he began stuffing his belongings in his bag. “Maybe.”

Gilbert gathered his own things, and after they’d made sure they weren’t leaving anything behind, they left for the school’s parking lot. His brother was waiting for him there, Matthew had said. The two walked rather slowly as they chatted, neither of them in a hurry to say their goodbyes.

They came to a stop at the edge of the large lot. It was relatively empty save for a handful of cars, most students having already rushed home for the weekend. A black Honda pulled up towards the front, making its presence known, but still keeping its distance. Gilbert figured that was Alfred.

“So...” Gilbert said after a short silence, stuffing his hands in his pockets to warm them from the chilly air.

Matthew's head turned in his direction at the sound of his voice, and Gilbert was briefly distracted as their eyes met, goosebumps rising along his skin. It was rare that Matthew's eyes caught Gilbert's before Gilbert's could catch his, simply because Matthew's eyes weren't ever actually searching for anything. So when they would suddenly shift and look him straight in the eye without warning, he couldn't help but be taken aback by how truly real they looked. Matthew had said they were made to look exactly like his own, right down to the unique shade of violet-blue.

He'd been in awe as Matthew told him, an afternoon spent between library shelves, listening to him open up to him about fuzzy memories of life in a children's cancer ward. Gilbert had been feeling it for a while now, their friendship becoming so much more than simply sharing

the same homeroom. And when Matthew shared that with him, he knew it couldn't have been just in his head, that feeling of a deepening bond. So that was it. That was when he started thinking about it. About all the ways they could hang out. Not just after school, but outside of school altogether. This was his chance. And he was taking it.

"So?" Matthew smiled, and Gilbert smiled back.

“When are you coming over to my place?”

“H-Huh?” Gilbert laughed; Matthew was sure it was due to the expression on his face. He rolled his eyes, face now flushed. He was reminded of the day they’d first met, nearly three months ago. His jokes hadn’t gotten any less corny. “Cut it out.”

“No, I’m serious,” he said, eyes softening as he watched the wind play in Matthew's hair. He seemed to be having some difficulty keeping it out of his face, tucking it behind his ears only to have it stolen by the breeze each time he did so. He looked so damn angelic, Gilbert thought, with those golden waves floating about his face and that dusting of pink across his cheeks. He stared, dumbfounded, genuinely wanting to know how it was possible for someone be that cute. He also wanted to know why this kid was making his thoughts so lame and sappy. God, he thought. That was so lame and sappy. Gilbert's face was stinging. But it was cold outside, of course it was.

“Next weekend. My place,” he said. “We’re doing this.”

“We…” Matthew paused, his face growing hotter. “We are?”

Gilbert nodded, grinning with anticipation. “We are.”

Alfred couldn’t ignore the way he felt when his brother slipped into the car, smiling to himself. He couldn’t ignore the way he felt as he drove away, watching the perplexing German kid disappear in his rear view mirror. He definitely couldn’t ignore the way he felt as he listened to Matthew eagerly tell him of his weekend plans, the plans he’d made with this friend named Gilbert. He knew that he should’ve felt happy, especially with his brother smiling the way that he was.

He wasn’t though.

A loud, long honk from the car behind them put an abrupt end to his inner ramblings and he quickly stepped on the gas, not exactly sure how long he’d been sitting at a green light.

Matthew frowned as the car jerked forward. Alfred was acting weird. He had noticed that his brother seemed quieter than usual when he got in the car, but he shrugged it off, chalking it up to fatigue after a strenuous day of practice. But he knew something was definitely wrong when Alfred wasn’t paying attention to the road. “Hey,” he prodded gently, “are you feeling ok?”

Alfred laughed, more a short huff of air than anything.“Yeah,” he replied. “I’m fine, bro.” He looked over at Matthew, frowning, and heaved an inaudible sigh. “Look,” he said as he turned down the radio, “we need to talk.”

Matthew was taken aback by how serious Alfred sounded. It was so unlike him. Even that dry laugh that had just left his lips, that wasn't Alfred either. The sound felt so harsh on his ears. Matthew hadn't even had to spend the ride home listening to one of his brother's silly ramblings; Alfred always had some ridiculous story to tell him. Everything just felt so wrong. What in the world was going on?

"About what?" he asked after a pause. He was beginning to feel a little anxious. Alfred only ever acted like this when something was really bothering him, and he wasn't bothered by much.

"Gilbert."

Matthew frowned, confused, and turned to his brother. He hadn't the slightest clue of what Alfred would answer, but he definitely hadn't been expecting that. "What about him?"

"Well, what do you know about him?"

Matthew was silent for a moment. Not because he wanted to be, but because he didn't know how to respond. He knew a plenty of things about Gilbert. What kind of question was that? "Why…would you ask me something like that?" he asked, voice wary.

"Mattie," he sighed, "I just don't know how I feel about him."

"What are you talking about?" He fiddled with the straps of the bag he held in his lap, perturbed. Alfred wasn't making any sense. "We're friends."

There was that word again. Alfred resisted the strong urge to scoff. "Friends."

"Yes," he said firmly, his anxiety melting away when he noticed the skepticism in Alfred's tone. "I told you as much when you met him. Are you trying to say that he isn't?"

"Look, that's not what I'm saying, alright?" Alfred could sense that Matthew was annoyed, but so was he. He couldn't understand why his brother was acting so naive. He knew exactly why Alfred was bringing this up. He *knew* that Matthew knew, and it irked Alfred that he was acting like he didn't.

"Then what *are* you trying to say?" Matthew couldn't believe that Alfred was talking about Gilbert in such an accusatory manner. Gilbert had been nothing but nice to him from the moment they'd exchanged their first words, so what was Alfred getting at? This all seemed to be coming out of nowhere. "Am I not allowed to have friends?" he quipped, a crease forming between his brows.

"Dude, you know that's not-"

"Then what is it?" he demanded.

Alfred's hands were trembling on the wheel. This was wrong. This was all wrong. This wasn't how it was supposed to happen. He'd just wanted to talk, not argue. He took a slow, deep breath to calm himself. It didn't work. "You're really gonna act like this?"

“Me? What about *you*?” he shouted, hands balled into fists at his sides. “What do you have against Gilbert? If you were feeling this way, why did you wait so long to say something? It’s been months, and *now* you want to question who I choose to be around? He’s my friend! What more do you need to know?”

“Ok, he’s your ‘friend,’ Matthew, but for how long?” Alfred snapped back. “How long do you think he’ll stick around? About as long as your other ones, right?”

Matthew winced as Alfred’s words sunk deep into his ears like daggers. His face fell, and he slowly unclenched his fists, sinking back into his seat. “Gilbert…h-he isn’t like that.”

Pity friends. Those were the kinds of friends Matthew made. People that talked to him, sat next to him in class, and even invited him over for dinner. Associating with Matthew made them feel good about themselves. With Matthew around they could show everyone how good of a person they were, show their teachers and parents how sweet they were for making friends with the handicapped boy.

Matthew was oblivious at the time, just happy to have his own social circle. A few months passed before they started disappearing, slowly distancing themselves until it was as if they never even existed. As if *he* had never existed. That was when Matthew was twelve. Alfred would never forget the day they walked home from school, Matthew sniffling at his side, asking him why his friends didn't like him anymore. Just thinking about it made Alfred's blood boil. Who was to say that this Gilbert guy wasn't the same?

“You say that now, but-”

“He isn’t like that,” Matthew repeated, his voice louder, more certain. “I’m not talking about this anymore.”

He faced the window, lips curling downwards into an indignant scowl. Gilbert was different. He was nothing like...them. Matthew could feel it. That Alfred was so dismissive of their friendship, that he had the audacity to suggest that Gilbert was insincere, infuriated him. He hated being talked down to, and Matthew never thought he'd hear such condescending words come from Alfred of all people, scolding him as if he was some gullible child. He hated it. Alfred's words played over and over in his head, and Matthew squeezed his eyes shut, wishing it would stop, not wanting to believe that those words had come from his brother.

Alfred looked over at him once more, noticed how his head had slumped forward, how his hands gripped feverishly at the edge of his seat. For a moment, Alfred suddenly felt guilty for upsetting him, but the feeling passed just as quickly as it had come. Why should he feel guilty? He was only trying to protect his brother from a repeat of the past, save him from another dose of pain he knew was soon to come. Why couldn’t Matthew see that?

“Fine,” came his bitter reply.

It was the last word exchanged between them. The rest of the ride home was shrouded in silence, save for the soft, steady purring of the car's engine. Alfred's knuckles had gone white, angry blue veins spreading across the back of his hands. Matthew's lips twitched, tongue squirming with words that he wouldn't dare allow to escape his being. Slowly, Alfred pulled

into the garage, parked where he always did. He stared forward, hands still on the wheel, mute. He heard the passenger door open, heard Matthew step out, winced as the door slammed shut. It wasn't until his brother disappeared inside that Alfred finally released the wheel, hands falling to his sides. He didn't know how long he stayed there like that, sitting in silence, staring at his red palms. Perhaps it was a few minutes, or maybe half an hour. Eventually, he pulled the keys from the ignition and trudged inside, the door shutting quietly behind him.

Dinner had never been so quiet. Their boys had never been so quiet. Sounds that were always swallowed up by evening conversation were now impossible to miss. Silverware clanked against ceramic, the grandfather clock clicked to a rhythm on the wall behind them, rivaled by the murmur of the crickets chirping outside. Arthur frowned, looking from his sons to his husband, only to find that he and Francis wore matching expressions. Neither Matthew nor Alfred had said a word to each other since sitting down, their eyes never leaving their plates. Classes were “good,” Matthew had said, and Alfred’s practice had gone “fine.” Neither of them chose to elaborate. Arthur and Francis were at a loss.

“You’ve barely touched your food, Matthieu,” Francis said, ending the lull in conversation. Matthew had been moving his food around on his plate for a while now, only lifting fork to mouth to take little more than a nibble. “Have I lost my touch?” he joked, hoping to get a smile out of him. He wasn’t so lucky.

“It’s great, Papa. Really,” he said, raising his head as he addressed his father. “I’m just…not very hungry.”

“Are you feeling alright, dear?” Arthur asked.

Matthew nodded. “I’m fine.”

“Are *you* feeling alright, Alfred?” His appetite was hearty as it always was (he was on his second plate), but he hadn’t spoken but a few words in the past twenty minutes. No one could shut Alfred up during dinner, and Arthur would always have to scold him for talking with his mouth full. But not tonight. His silence was unnerving.

“Great, Pops,” he said, just barely glancing up from his food.

Again, the two parents looked at one another. The look on Arthur’s face said it all. The time to address this was now. They had never seen their sons act like this, ignore each other as if they weren’t sitting across the table from one another, as if they weren’t in the very same room. The boys had always had their fair share of squabbles and disagreements; as siblings such things were unavoidable. But Arthur knew just as well as Francis that this wasn’t just a silly case of bickering. The hostility between them hung in the air like a thick, monstrous fog, hovered overhead like an angry cloud just waiting to birth a storm. Just the sight of them behaving so coldly towards each other was more than Arthur could bear.

“What in heaven’s name is going on with you two?” he finally asked. He looked at them both, his expression a mixture of frustration and worry. Alfred swallowed. Matthew’s fork stabbed at his green beans.

Chirping.

Ticking.

Silence.

“Boys,” Francis said. He’d intended to be stern, but it came out as a plea.

Alfred was first to speak. He grimaced as he spoke, as if he was angry that his tongue had disobeyed him. “It’s nothing,” he said, taking hold of his empty glass, rattling the cubes of ice that had settled at the bottom. He then looked up from his glass and, for the first time since he’d sat down, over at Matthew. The very second he did so, he wished that he hadn’t. The anger he’d tried so hard to quell returned to the surface with a fierceness that even he couldn’t control. He felt his lips moving, felt his voice leave his throat. “Matthew’s just too good for my advice is all.”

Matthew paused, abruptly ending his assault on his meal. It was even more grating than before, the voice. The voice that Matthew had come to accept was his brother’s, bitter and biting. He squeezed the fork in his grip, the metal digging into the insides of his fingers with the action. His eyes narrowed, brows twitching together. “I never asked for your advice,” he retorted.

Alfred laughed a laugh that wasn’t his, setting his glass down with a heavy thump. “Yeah, well, maybe I was trying to look out for you, Matthew,” he spat. “Did you ever think of that?”

“Look out for me?” Matthew’s head shot up, fork dropping to his plate, face contorted in disgust. “By treating me like I’m stupid?”

“I never-”

“Yes, you did,” Matthew said, raising his voice. “Since when do *my* friends need *your* approval?”

Alfred jolted to his feet, chair scraping loudly against the floor as he stood. “That’s bullshit and you know it!”

“Alfred!” Arthur gasped. Whether Alfred heard him or not he didn’t know.

“All I was trying to do was help you,” he shouted, hands splayed across the table, “but you wouldn’t listen!”

“I don’t *need* your help, Alfred!” He flinched. Matthew’s voice shook as he spoke, fighting against the knot forming in his throat. “I never asked for it! Why do you always think you have to come to someone’s rescue? Why can’t you just mind your own business? Just…just stop it!”

Both now stood with the table between them, silence returning. Alfred’s scowl had vanished, and he stood there, struck speechless by the tears pooling in Matthew’s eyes. He suddenly felt

a hand on his arm. He looked down and winced as green met blue. He quickly looked away from those sorrowful eyes to the floor beneath his feet, ashamed.

“We’re going for a ride,” the Englishman said softly. “I’ll be in the garage.” Alfred said nothing, continuing to stare at the floor. Only when his father’s footsteps became distant did he follow after him. He didn’t look up when he left, not wanting to see the tears that he knew were on his brother’s face.

As Arthur started the car and Alfred buckled his seatbelt for the long night ahead, Matthew followed Francis out onto the back porch, where they sat side by side, crickets chirping a quiet tune as they filled the night air with heavy conversation.

It was almost midnight when Matthew heard a gentle knock on his door. His first reaction was to ask who it was, but he stopped himself short. He didn’t need ask who it was; he already knew. He slowly sat up in his bed, nibbled at his lip, his movements hesitant. “Come in,” he said. He heard the door open, footsteps, the soft click of the door closing.

Alfred stood with his back flush against the door, hands buried deep in the pockets of his sweatpants. He didn’t speak right away, convinced that once Matthew heard his voice and realized it was him, he would tell him to leave. He wanted more than anything to be proven wrong. “Hey,” he said.

“Hey,” Matthew replied, closing the book in his hands and placing it on his nightstand. He hadn’t really been reading it, his mind wandering elsewhere each time he tried to concentrate on the text. He wondered where Alfred and his father had gone, wondered when they would get back, wondered if Alfred would still be angry at him. Even as Matthew sat across from his brother now he wondered if he looked as regretful as he felt.

“Can we talk?”

Matthew nodded, and Alfred finally left the door for the chair at Matthew’s computer desk. It was clean and tidy as it always was, textbooks off to one side, his Mac in the center, and an assortment of supplies off to the other. He found himself smiling, remembering how as children Matthew would complain about Alfred’s messiness, stumbling around their room and picking up toys with a pout on his face, grumbling about how they would get in trouble if they didn’t clean up. The smile wiped clean off his face when he turned to face his brother, whose head was bowed to the floor, hands balled in his lap. “Mattie,” he said, “I-”

“I’m sorry.”

Alfred balked as he slowly sat down, stunned by Matthew having stolen his next words. “What…what are *you* apologizing for?”

“For what I said…at dinner,” he said, facing Alfred now instead of the floor. “I didn’t mean it.”

“Mattie…you don't need to apologize. You had every right to be mad at me,” Alfred said, raking a hand through his hair. "Everything you said was right. It's your life, not mine, and I

shouldn't have given my opinion when you didn't even ask me for it." He paused, fingers curling at his scalp. “What I said back in the car, at the table...”

His voice caught as Matthew's gaze fell again, and he felt his gut wrench at the sight, the sight of just how deeply those words had cut. His face and throat began to burn with shame, the same way they had as he mumbled to his father from the passenger seat, too embarrassed, too disgusted with himself to repeat exactly what he'd said to Matthew on the ride home. Arthur had pulled over the car just as Alfred's voice had begun to crack, and by the time he'd turned off the engine, Alfred was taking off his glasses, silently wiping away tears with his sleeve.

It didn't matter how soothing his father's hand was at his back, or how gently Arthur told him he'd had the right intentions, but the wrong remedy; all he could hear was his own voice in his head, shattering what little faith Matthew had managed to keep in those around him. Matthew had always preferred to see the good in people. Since when had Alfred become someone that only expected the bad? He was supposed to protect his brother from those who might make him feel small, but tonight, he'd been the very person to do that.

"I shouldn't have talked to you like that," he said, and Matthew rose his head, his eyes leaving the floor at the strain in Alfred's voice. "I was just so worried, you know? The last time I saw you hanging around someone so much, they…”

"I know," Matthew said softly.

"But I was such an asshole about it, and I-" Alfred paused, throat still tight, hoping Matthew would understand how much he meant as he finished with, "I'm really, really sorry, Matt."

"I know," Matthew said again, and only when his lips formed a small smile did Alfred realize how much he'd missed it. "I forgive you." He heard Alfred let out a whisper of an exhale.

"Really?"

"Promise," Matthew replied with a nod, expecting his brother would let out another sigh, more obnoxious, more familiar than the last. But Alfred stayed silent, and it was clear to Matthew that doubt was still there. The computer chair squeaked slightly as Alfred shifted his weight, and immediately Matthew knew that Alfred didn't want to be sitting there anymore.

"Can we..." Alfred began.

"Hug on it?" Matthew finished.

"Oh thank God," Alfred sighed, the three words seemingly morphed into one, and Matthew just barely managed to get his arms open before his brother swooped in at his side with a bear hug, crushing him between his arms. They used to do this all the time when they were little kids, have fights and give each other the silent treatment before their parents made them apologize and make up with a hug. They would pout, say their sorry's, and then squeeze each other as hard as they could, their bickering forgotten in lieu of a competition for the tightest hug. They must've been eight or nine the last time they did this, and the thought of it made Matthew laugh as he hugged Alfred back.

"You were right." Matthew said as Alfred pulled away.

"Mm?"

"They were awful to me," he said. "You were coming from a good place, and I shouldn't have acted like I didn't know why you worried."

It wasn't something he liked to remember, how little by little people he believed were his friends began to avoid him entirely. They'd grown tired of his inconvenience, of picking him for sports in P.E., knowing he'd make them lose anyway. They'd grown resentful of how often they had to tone themselves down, how they couldn't run through the halls after school let out because it would meaning leaving Matthew behind. They'd grown frustrated with teaching him the controls of their favorite video games, with how they couldn't ride their bikes together to the park because Matthew was the only one who didn't have one. He'd become a nuisance, and he would never forget how gutted he felt at the realization. Though it was hard for him to admit, he still carried a lot of that rejection with him even today. Had Alfred not been there to pick up the pieces of his shattered self, been there to tell him that it wasn't his fault, that he'd done nothing wrong, he never would've been able to recover the little slivers of self-worth that he'd managed to.

"So thank you. But..."

Matthew paused and then let out a sudden, soft chuckle, as if laughing to himself. "Gilbert," he said, shaking his head gently, "you don't have to worry about him. I know he's not like that." His eyes met Alfred's, and he held his head high as he said his next words, earnest and sure. "I'm not the clueless little kid I was in middle school anymore. I don't hang around people who pity me."

Alfred smiled, gave a firm nod. “You don't know how glad I am to hear you say that.” He sighed with relief and leaned back against Matthew's headboard. "So...Gilbert's a pretty cool guy then?"

Matthew nodded his head, so quickly and vigorously that it made Alfred laugh. “He is. He can be really silly sometimes, but in a good way, you know? Oh, and he has a younger brother named Ludwig that goes to our school too."

"Oh yeah?"

Matthew nodded some more. "Yeah, and he introduced me to some of his friends too. There's Toni and Lovino," he said, counting the names off on his fingers, "and then Lovino has a twin brother named Feliciano, but he goes by Feli."

"Fellow twins, huh? You'll have to introduce me to them," he said, smiling at how Matthew face lit up even more.

"Yeah, they're really nice. Gilbert said he's known them and Toni since they were in elementary and that they all live in the same neighborhood, so they're basically like brothers."

"Sounds like a sit-com," Alfred laughed.

"Right?" Matthew laughed too.

"So Gilbert's cool, and so are his friends."

"Yes," Matthew said, smiling down at his comforter. "He said...that his friends were my friends too."

Alfred noticed how genuinely Matthew spoke that word. Friends. And again he felt ashamed for having taken away the joy of that word the first time Matthew had said it. But he knew there was no taking back what he'd said, and so he rather than dwell on his mistake, he was committed to making sure he would never repeat it.

"Your friends sound great, Matt," he said softly. "I'd love to meet them. And get to know Gilbert more, too."

Matthew smiled at him before his eyes slowly shifted downward again. "You know," he said after a short pause, "one thing I really want you to know about Gilbert is that...he's never once acted like I was some charity case." Alfred was taken aback by this, as it was the first time he'd ever heard his brother so candidly describe the way he felt others treated him. "He doesn't act weird around me, or treat me any differently or anything like that. It's been that way since we met." There was another pause before he finished with, "No one's ever been so nice to me..."

Alfred looked at his brother's profile as he spoke, and watched a light pink slowly creep across his face. And instantly, it clicked. First, it surprised him, his eyebrows lifting on his forehead. But then, upon seeing Matthew give a shy shrug, as if to shake off the sudden intensity behind those words, Alfred's expression softened. So, he thought, this is how things were panning out. Though tempted, he decided against pointing it out. Because maybe Matthew hadn’t even figured it out yet. He was sure Matthew would tell him when he did.

“If you feel good about him,” he said, rising to his feet, “then I do too, bro.” Matthew smiled his thanks, following the sound of Alfred’s footsteps as he headed for the door. “You up for a midnight snack?” Alfred asked, glancing back over his shoulder as he reached for the doorknob. “Dad got us dessert.”

“Really?” Matthew perked up at that. After spending the last few hours cooped up in his room, he was long overdue for something to munch on. He left his bed and threw on his slippers, following Alfred out the door. “What kind of dessert?” he asked as they reached the stairs.

Alfred grinned. “McFlurries and apple pies.”

“…McDonald’s.” Matthew said wryly, promptly rolling his eyes. He couldn’t help smiling as the other laughed, the first real laugh he’d heard all day. It was completely and undeniably Alfred, and Matthew was glad to have his brother back. They sat together in the kitchen, enjoying each other’s company while indulging in their cheap sweets. Matthew listened contentedly to his brother’s sugar-fueled chatter, piping in occasionally when the opportunity provided itself.

“But seriously, Mattie,” Alfred said with a mouth full of apple pie, “I didn’t know what to think when I saw you standing next to this weird albino kid.”

Matthew stopped mid-slurp and pulled his straw from his mouth, blinked. “Wait,” he said, tilting his head to one side. “Gilbert has albinism?”

Alfred snorted. “You’re kidding.”

“No! I’m *blind*, Alfred. How was I supposed to know?”

Alfred nearly choked on his milkshake from laughing so hard.

In the room overhead lie two sleepy eavesdroppers.

“Sounds like they’ve patched things up,” Francis whispered beneath the sheets, arm curling around Arthur’s waist. “Good work today, *mon chéri*.”

Arthur smiled as he tucked himself beneath the warmth of his touch, eyelids growing heavy. “You too, frog.”

Captured

Chapter Summary

Gilbert Beilschmidt is a big hypocrite.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

⠠⠶ ⠿⠷⠿⠷⠶⠄

Gilbert didn't know what to do with himself. There was nothing on TV, Antonio wasn't responding to his texts, and his brother was currently unavailable to pester. He'd taken out the garbage, the dishes were spotless, and he'd already cleaned his room—twice. He was running out of distractions. With a sigh, he pulled his phone from his pocket and stared at its face for what seemed like the thousandth time that day. He had less than an hour until Matthew's arrival. He groaned as he turned off the TV, tossing the remote to his side before falling onto the couch. A low whine left his lips, the pitiful sound muffled by the decorative pillow pressed against his face. Waiting was the absolute worst. Especially when the person Gilbert was waiting for had been lingering in his mind for days.

"Lutz," he called out, lifting his head as if it was too heavy for his shoulders. He frowned when he was answered with silence. His brother had been up there for far too long; it had been a half hour since Gilbert had last seen him and he was getting lonely. He missed having someone to harass.

"Luuuutz!" he called out again, louder than before, making sure his voice carried upstairs. There was another short silence before a response finally followed. It wasn't a shout, but it was clear that the younger of the two was slightly irritated.

"Gilbert, please," came Ludwig's voice, echoing from down the hall. "I'm speaking on the phone."

Gilbert pouted, lips moving as he silently mocked the other. He could already picture the look on his brother's face, a stern crease in his brow, a frown on his lips, fingers resting at the bridge of his nose. The thought brought a satisfied smirk to his face. He flipped over onto his back and before he knew it his phone was back in his hand, red eyes squinting as the touchscreen lit up to reveal that only a minute had passed.

"God dammit," he moaned, throwing the phone to the other end of the couch.

Gilbert couldn't remember the last time he'd felt so anxious. It was such an unawesome feeling, the way his body refused to sit still, the way he couldn't seem to stay focused on anything, thoughts spiraling every which way. It was a strange sensation, foreign even, a little

worm of a nuisance that had managed to burrow its way beneath the massive wall that was Gilbert's ego.

He felt ridiculous for allowing himself to get so worked up, but the more he thought about how worked up he was, the more flustered he became. Try as he might, nothing he did was enough to distract him from the fact that Matthew was on his way over. It was all Gilbert could think about. All he *had* been thinking about for the past week. Like a sappy little schoolgirl.

Never in his life did he ever think that he would use such words to describe himself, the impeccably handsome, undeniably charming, supremely awesome Gilbert Beilschmidt. But as things stood now, the words seemed a perfect match, and it made him feel all the more ridiculous. None of this would be happening to him if Matthew would just stop being so damned cute, ugly Christmas sweaters and seasonal socks being his most recent offenses. And that was excluding the most heinous offense of all: his face. It just had to be a crime to be that cute. No one could convince him otherwise.

The roaring of a plane passing overhead yanked Gilbert from his thoughts, and he blinked a few times, stunned by the warm tingle of blood swirling in his cheeks. He quickly sat up, face growing hotter. It was time for another distraction. He was sure a trip to the mailbox would do it. And while he was doing that, he could get the fresh air that he so desperately needed. He couldn't get out the door fast enough.

"Gilbert…what are you doing?"

At hearing his name, he looked up from the book in his hands, eyes rolling back to see his brother standing at the far end of the room, phone call apparently finished. "Reading," he answered with a shrug, gaze shifting back to the pages hovering above his head. "What's it look like?"

Ludwig made a face, eyeing the thick book his brother held. "That's an IKEA catalog." He grimaced at the way Gilbert was sprawled about the couch, legs thrown over the back as he hung upside down. He hoped Gilbert hadn't been lying that way for too long; all of that blood rushing to his head couldn't have been good for him.

"*Ja*, and?" Gilbert said, eyes scanning over one of the most ridiculous chairs he'd seen yet. He felt sorry for the poor bastards sitting at home trying to put together the damn thing. "Maybe I'm thinking about buying a new coffee table or something."

Ludwig blinked. "…I see."

Gilbert smirked as he peeked over the catalog once more, taking in his little brother's appearance. "Your hair's down." He snickered when Ludwig averted his gaze and (rather ungracefully) sat up, repositioning himself in a way that wouldn't make him so lightheaded.

"Yes, well," Ludwig said, a warmth surfacing to his cheeks, "Feliciano seems to like it this way…I thought I would do it more frequently."

Gilbert cackled, throwing his head back in his mirth. “Feli’s got you wrapped around his little finger. *Mein kleines Brüderchen*,” he sighed, placing a hand theatrically over his heart. "Captured by one of the Vargas twins.”

Ludwig refused to look at him, instead focusing his attention on the dim fire burning across the room. He cleared his throat, the color of his face deepening in hue. “Shut up.”

“Aww, it’s ok, Lutz,” Gilbert cooed. “Boyfriends make you wanna do sappy shit like that. S’not your fault.”

Ludwig rolled his eyes and walked over to the fireplace, taking a spare log from the hearth and placing it on the weakened fire. “You tease me, but I’m not the one who’s been acting strange all morning,” he said, prodding gently at the flames. He hadn’t planned on saying anything initially, but it was impossible not to point out his brother’s blatant hypocrisy.

Gilbert snorted. “If by ‘strange’ you mean awesome, then I guess I can’t argue with you there,” he said, grinning as he leaned against the armrest at his side. “I tend to do that a lot.”

Ludwig rolled his eyes a second time. “*Nein, Bruder*. By ‘strange’ I mean strange.”

“What are you talking about?”

“You were just reading a furniture catalog.”

Gilbert shrugged. “So?”

“You were in here sulking, and then you started shouting insults at the TV.”

He looked off to the side, mouth twitching into a rigid smirk. He hadn’t known Ludwig had been able to hear that. “Yeah, well, there was nothing good on.”

Ludwig sighed, crossing his arms at his chest. His brother was so transparent. “I suppose pacing at the front door is perfectly normal too?”

Gilbert tensed slightly, a bark of laughter leaving his throat despite himself. “Pacing?” He scoffed. “I was just—” He faltered, scrambling internally for any sort of believable excuse. “Waiting,” he offered.

“For Matthew,” Ludwig finished for him.

“Obviously,” he said. “What’s your point?”

“My ‘point’ is that you’ve been sitting in here glued to this couch for the past two hours waiting for the doorbell to ring. If I have been ‘captured,’ then you are in the midst of joining me it seems.” Ludwig had never been the teasing type, but he would allow himself to indulge in such amusement just this once, if only to see his brother’s reaction. He was not disappointed, watching with concealed satisfaction as color spread along his brother’s ears and neck. Hypocrite indeed.

Ludwig knew that Gilbert had grown fond of his soft-spoken classmate, and Gilbert knew that Ludwig knew; it wasn't some giant secret. At least it wasn't anymore, not after Antonio had blabbed to Lovino, and Lovino to Feliciano, and Feliciano to Ludwig. It was mildly annoying at first, discovering his secret wasn't so secret anymore, but he quickly got over it after learning that it wouldn't have mattered one way or the other.

"Oh, for fuck's sake, Gilbert," Lovino had said some weeks ago as they lounged around the Beilschmidts' basement, Antonio and Gilbert munching on pizza that Lovino refused to touch. "Toni and I knew before you even said anything to him. We were just waiting for you to spill it, you predictable bastard."

Gilbert could still remember that stupid, smug look Lovino wore, and how his face looked more and more punchable with each passing second. He could still remember how unbearably hot he felt as question after question spilled from Antonio's mouth, as he pointed out all the little things Gilbert did when Matthew was around, things Gilbert himself wasn't even aware of. If he could have sewn Antonio's lips shut, he would have. And now here was his little brother, reminding Gilbert yet again of the bizarre emotions churning inside him, of his fluttering stomach, his restless limbs, and his not-so-innocent thoughts. He could feel a smirk tugging at his lips, a sharp chuckle following soon after. He knew he was already in too deep when his stick-in-the-mud, no-nonsense brother was openly taunting him.

"You're enjoying this, aren't you?" Gilbert said, sending a knowing smile his brother's way. "Watching me lose my mind over this kid."

"To an extent." Ludwig allowed himself a small smile. "But *shaudenfreude* is more your forte. It's…interesting more than anything. To see you like this."

Gilbert laughed again. "Maybe if Toni had just answered my texts, I wouldn't be such a fucking wreck. Bastard's probably busy getting his dick sucked."

"Gilbert!"

"What?" Gilbert gave an innocent shrug. "It's happened before. You'd probably ignore me too if you had Feli in your lap." He snickered when Ludwig's mouth fell open. "Am I wrong?"

Gilbert quickly found himself alone again, roaring with laughter as Ludwig left the room muttering about his "filthy mouth." He sunk back into a little corner of the couch, hand on his stomach as he caught his breath and wiped tears from his eyes. Just as he made to grab his neglected phone from the place he'd chucked it, Aster came padding into the room. The dog plopped herself at Gilbert's feet, still a bit disoriented from her nap.

"Well, look who's finally up. Sleep well, girl? " he asked, reaching down to give the golden retriever an affectionate ear-scratching. She lapped at Gilbert's fingers, her way of letting her owner know that she was indeed well rested. "So," he sighed, stroking her soft, shiny coat, "think you can keep me company till Mattie gets here?" Aster rested her head in Gilbert's lap, and Gilbert gently pet her head, absentminded, wondering what else he could do to waste time. The retriever yawned and Gilbert looked down at her, eyes widening as mental gears

finally clicked into place. His next distraction was (quite literally) sitting right under his nose. With a triumphant grin on his face, he sprung from the couch, whistling for Aster to follow.

Ludwig left the kitchen to see just what it was that had his beloved dog so excited; even in the next room over he could hear her tail wagging, thumping rhythmically against the floor. He found Gilbert at the front door, securing a leash around Aster's collar.

"Gilbert, what are you doing?" He was just as confused as he was the first time he'd uttered those words.

"Taking a walk with Aster," he replied. "She can do her business, and I can keep my sanity."

Ludwig frowned as the other opened the door. "But it's almost one o'clock."

Gilbert looked back over his shoulder as he followed Aster outside, the cold air stinging his cheeks. "You think I'd invite Mattie over here just to stand him up? I'll be back in fifteen."

"But—"

"Twenty tops!" Gilbert called back. He made to close the door behind himself but stopped suddenly, turning to face his brother. He smirked. "And nice try, but you're wrong."

Ludwig frowned. "What?"

"I can't be captured when *I'm* the one doing the capturing."

And with that Gilbert hastily closed the door, proclamation lingering in the air.

Matthew didn't know what he was waiting for. The door was right in front of him, his finger was on the doorbell, and yet he was still standing there like an idiot. The air was cold and dry, and Matthew buried his face into the thick scarf at his neck, grateful for the extra layers his worrywart of a father had forced him to wear. Alfred had dropped him off not even a minute ago, driving off with a gentle honk once Matthew had safely made it to his friend's doorstep —the doorstep he shouldn't have been on anymore. This was silly. *He* was being silly. It was only homework, Matthew reminded himself, nodding with assurance. Only homework. He played the words over and over in his head, a personal mantra of sorts, and felt himself relax a bit. Only homework.

With Gilbert.

Matthew's hand dropped quickly to his side, his head lowering bashfully to the ground as if the door could see his reddening cheeks. He shook his head, nibbling gently at his lip. How was he supposed to act normally when merely *thinking* about Gilbert made him red in the face? How *could* he act normally when hearing his voice made his chest feel light, made his head feel like it was swimming? He gulped, chilled fingers curling around his cane. He needed to keep calm. There was no good that would come from psyching himself out, that much he was sure of. He could do this. It was only homework. Slowly, he exhaled, his breath visibly spilling from his mouth, and nodded with finality. The bell echoed in his ears long after the ringing had stopped, the sound reminding him that he had only seconds until he was

face-to-face with the boy who had reduced him to nothing short of a nervous wreck. He gripped his cane tighter as the door clicked open.

“Mattie, you’re here!”

Matthew frowned at the greeting, not because he didn’t appreciate it, but because of who had said it. A voice that sweet and bubbly could only belong to one person. His tongue didn’t move as fast as he’d wanted it to, his body still recovering from shock. It was strange to hear his voice outside of school. “F...Feli?”

Feliciano giggled at how baffled Matthew looked. “You were expecting Gilbert, huh?” He was answered with a slow nod. “Don’t worry, he stepped out for a bit, but he’s on his way back now. Come in, come in!” he chirped, grabbing Matthew’s hand. “It’s freezing out there!”

Matthew smiled and thanked him, allowing himself to be pulled inside by the smaller boy. He shuddered as he was wrapped in a blanket of warmth, the heat feeling incredible on his face and body. Feliciano closed the door behind him and sighed graciously as the chilly air was sent back from where it came. “Oh, let me take your coat,” he said, tugging gently at his friend’s sleeve. “And your bag, too. I’ll put it right here by the door.”

“Oh, right. Thanks,” he replied, quickly stripping down to his clothes before handing off his belongings, save his cane. He was only just beginning to realize how weird he felt, being in an unfamiliar house, completely unaware of where everything was. Feliciano encouraged him to leave his shoes by the door and Matthew did so, enjoying the plush feel of the carpeted floor beneath his feet. He listened to Feliciano sing a song he didn’t recognize as he put away his things, and found himself smiling. The closest Lovino had ever gotten to singing was, well, screaming. The Vargas twins were definitely a unique pair.

“There we are,” Feliciano said as he shut the closet door. “Come with me to the kitchen,” he said, taking Matthew’s hand again. “We can have some cider while we wait for Gilbert to get back. It’s really good, I know you'll love it.”

“Sounds good,” Matthew said, chuckling as Feliciano pulled him along like a child might a parent. This was how Feliciano had come to usher him around, a mutual agreement between the two. There was a short period after they’d first met where Feliciano would eagerly take his hand, realize his mistake, apologize, and then offer his arm. This went on for some time before Matthew realized that it was a harmless habit that the boy would probably never break, and so he let him know that it was alright, that he really didn’t mind either way. After all, it wasn’t like Feliciano was some stranger on the street. Alfred used to do the same thing when they were younger; it was kind of nostalgic.

“Are you studying with me and Gil?” Matthew asked. He still didn’t know why Feliciano had been there to greet him at the door. Although they weren’t in the same class, he knew that Feliciano was reading the same novel as they were; he had complained about how confusing it was a few weeks back as they ate lunch together. Gilbert had agreed, and Matthew spent a full five minutes trying (and failing) to make things clearer for them before Lovino demanded they talk about something that “wasn’t so fucking boring.”

“Oh, no,” he laughed sheepishly, shaking his head. “I actually haven’t been reading like I should. Luddy and I are about to go to a movie.”

“Oh, Ludwig is here too?”

Feliciano hummed the affirmative and beamed as his eyes fell on his boyfriend, who’d turned around as he heard them walk in. “Mattie’s here!” he announced, raising Matthew’s arm as if he’d just won the WWE championship. “He beat Gil just like you said.”

Ludwig sighed softly and turned off the stovetop, shaking his head as he took in Matthew’s presence—and his brother’s continued absence. “I was hoping I’d be proven wrong. *Hallo*, Matthew,” he said, sending an apologetic smile the boy’s way.

“Hey, Ludwig.”

“Please, make yourself comfortable. Gilbert should be back soon enough,” he said, not able to control the way his eyebrow twitched as his brother’s name left his mouth. “I apologize for his absence. He’s...walking the dog.”

“It’s alright.” Matthew smiled as he followed Feliciano to the table at the far end of the room. “I know he isn’t the most punctual person,” he laughed. Gilbert had caused the both of them to be late to class multiple times—not that they’d ever been reprimanded for it; a white cane did wonders for avoiding tardy slips.

“He’s never been,” Ludwig sighed again. He reached into the cabinets above the sink and pulled out three mugs, filling them one by one with the cider he’d just prepared. “But I just don’t understand how his guest has made it to his home before he has. It’s unbelievably rude.”

“It’s ok, really,” Matthew insisted, thanking Ludwig as he placed his drink on the table in front of him. With cautious hands he took hold of the glass and brought it to his lips, blowing at the rising steam. “I’ll get back at him somehow,” he said, smiling to himself. Having Gilbert do his homework for him sounded like a pretty fair deal. “Besides, he owes me for all the detentions I’ve saved him from.”

Ludwig shook his head while Feliciano snickered behind his hand. His brother was hopeless. “You’ll hear no objections from me.”

“So,” Feliciano peeped at Matthew’s side in that sing-songy voice of his, “is this your first study date?”

Ludwig visibly tensed and had Matthew not been the incredibly polite house guest that he was, the contents of his mug would have surely sprayed from his mouth. He struggled to keep himself from choking, forcing the crisp, tangy liquid down his in throat one large gulp. “W-What?” he sputtered out, blue eyes wide.

“I guess it is, huh?” he giggled.

“N-no! No, it’s not,” he said, grimacing at the dreadfully familiar sensation of soon-to-be-rosy cheeks.

Feliciano looked surprised. “This isn’t your first time at Gilbert’s?”

“No, it is, but i-it’s not...” Matthew's voice fell to just above a whisper, “a *date*.”

He smiled in a way that wasn’t completely innocent. “It’s not?”

“Of course not,” Matthew said quite hurriedly, mumbling his words into his mug. What a ridiculous notion, he thought, face burning hot as pavement in mid-July. He and Gilbert did this all the time. It just so happened that this time, they’d be doing it at Gilbert’s house. It wasn’t like it would be any different. Not at all. Matthew had already convinced himself of this before he walked through the door, and he was sticking to it. Only. Homework. He took another sip of cider to alleviate the dryness of his mouth, the steaming drink only worsening how hot he suddenly felt.

Feliciano hummed, a sly smirk on his lips. That definitely wasn’t what Gilbert had been saying. “If you say so.”

Ludwig cleared his throat quite loudly from behind the counter and sent a stern look his boyfriend’s way. Feliciano stuck out his tongue in rebellion, and Ludwig sighed. “Feli."

"Yes?" he answered, sweet as molasses.

"Go and see if the car has warmed up.”

He frowned, cheeks puffing out as he pouted. “But it’s cold,” he whined. “Can you do it?”

Those bright, doey eyes might have gotten him off the hook most days, but this day was not one of them. Not after he’d just pulled a stunt like that. Ludwig resumed wiping down the counter, unbothered. “*Nein*.”

“Pleease?”

“Do you want us to be late for the movie?”

“Alright, alright. I’m going,” he conceded, pulling himself reluctantly from his chair. He quickly grabbed a jacket and slipped out the door, smiling to himself. Sure, he probably shouldn't have teased Matthew like that, but it was only fair; he had done the same thing to Gilbert. It was just too much fun to mess with two friends who were so obviously on the verge of becoming so much more than that. When exactly the ball would drop Feliciano didn’t know, but he hoped it was sooner rather than later. Now it was just a waiting game.

Matthew’s shoes were the first thing Gilbert saw as he walked through the front door, heart racing so fast he feared it might explode from his chest. “Shit,” he panted, closing the door as Aster followed him inside, the dog breathing just as hard. He ripped himself out of his coat and chucked it in the closet, kicking off his shoes with a quickness he hadn’t known he was

capable of. He was already ten minutes late, and he'd be damned if he kept Matthew waiting any longer.

He followed the murmur of conversation into the living room, where he found Ludwig, Feliciano, and the boy who had him out of breath. He was standing near the fireplace, hands outstretched towards the dancing flames. "Matthew," he breathed, gulping when Matthew turned around and smiled at him.

"Gi—" Matthew was abruptly silenced when he collided with a barking wall of fur, everyone gasping collectively as he fell to the floor.

"Aster!" Ludwig shouted, horrified at the sight of his well-trained dog behaving so wildly. Gilbert was first to rush over, Ludwig and Feliciano right on his heels. But then all three of them stopped suddenly, freezing in place when Matthew's laughter filled the room.

Matthew could just barely remember the last time he'd been so close to a dog. He couldn't have been more than five. His parents had allowed he and Alfred to pet a neighbor's puppy one morning on the way to school, and he remembered how cold and wet its nose had felt against his hand, and how soft its fur was between his tiny fingers. And now here he was, finding out what it felt like to be covered in dog kisses. He lie trapped on his back at the mercy of his four-legged assailant, giggling as the dog lapped at his cheeks.

"Aww," Feliciano gushed. "She really likes you, Mattie."

"Fuck," Gilbert mumbled under his breath, unable to withstand the intensity of cute he was currently witnessing. Matthew hadn't even said two words to him, but he could already feel his brain turning to mush. Fantastic.

Ludwig sighed with relief, glad to see that Matthew was unharmed. Still, he was sure the boy had had more than enough dog saliva for the day, and whistled sharply to catch Aster's attention. "*Platz,*" he said, the command rolling sternly off his tongue. The retriever complied and backed away, sitting herself obediently at Ludwig's feet. Matthew couldn't help feeling a little disappointed by the dog's disappearance, but he was grateful that he could move freely again. He slowly sat up, smiling when Gilbert's voice reached his ears.

"Are you alright?" Gilbert asked, hurrying over to him. "Aster knows not to jump on people like that. I have no idea what's gotten into her."

"I'm fine," he laughed, a hand wiping at his face. "She's really sweet."

"Here." Gilbert held out a hand. "Let me help you up." Matthew nodded and held out his own, Gilbert grabbing hold and pulling him to his feet.

"You're late," Matthew said, a wry smile on his lips.

"Y-Yeah, my bad." Gilbert grinned sheepishly. "There was some construction so I had to take the long way back, and I tried running back here as fast as I could, but there was so much damn traffic and— " He was interrupted as Matthew laughed.

“So, you ran here. I was wondering why you sounded so out of breath.”

“Well, yeah, I didn’t wanna keep you waiting.” He blushed, looking off to the side. “You know, ‘cause I knew you were probably going crazy without my awesome presence.”

Matthew rolled his eyes. “How did you know?”

“Eh, you know, tends to happen when people are away from my greatness for too long.” Gilbert smiled as Matthew laughed again, pride bubbling in his chest at the fact that *he* had been the cause of such an adorable noise. His laugh wasn’t the only thing that was adorable though. “Your hair’s a mess.”

Matthew flushed, smoothing his hands over his hair. “Yeah, well, it was fine before your dog tackled me to the floor.”

Gilbert smirked. “I said it was a mess. I didn’t say it wasn’t cute.”

“Knots and tangles aren’t cute,” Matthew pouted, an expression that only reiterated Gilbert’s sentiments. He could only go by what felt right, patting down the fly aways and making sure his hair wasn’t in his face. That felt about right. Sort of.

“Want a little help?” he offered, an attempt to make amends for laughing at the boy’s current state.

“No.” Matthew pursed his lips, pushing some strands bashfully behind his ear. “...Yes.”

“Thought so.”

“Shut up.”

Even though Matthew knew what was coming next, he still couldn’t control the way his stomach fluttered as Gilbert inched nearer, nor the way his breath hitched in his throat as Gilbert’s hand came to rest atop his head. He’d half expected Gilbert to muss it up even more, but Gilbert hadn’t had such intentions. His movements were slow and gentle, and Matthew held back a shiver as his fingers ghosted over his scalp, coaxing the rebellious curls into place.

It was even softer than Gilbert had imagined it would be. Like silken honey beneath his fingertips. His eyes followed the slight waves of his bangs, settled on one stubborn curl that refused to be tamed, on the delicate tendrils framing that frustratingly cute face of his. The last thing he wanted to do was stop, and Matthew wouldn’t have minded if his touch had lingered a little longer, but it was over just as soon as it had started, Gilbert’s hand falling reluctantly back to his side.

“Thanks...” Matthew said softly.

“Yeah...no problem.”

“Have fun, you two!” Feliciano called from down the hall, startling the both of them. Neither of them had noticed the others leave the room.

“Feli,” he heard his brother groan, followed by snickering and the door shutting closed.

Gilbert turned back around at hearing the door lock, clearing his throat. “You hungry?”

“Yeah, a little. I kinda skipped lunch.” Matthew admitted, smiling sheepishly. “I was really into this book and I...forgot.”

“You skipped out on lunch to read that shitty thing?”

He frowned when Gilbert laughed, folding his arms at his chest. “It was getting really good, okay?”

“You’re such a nerd, do you know that?”

“A nerd who got you a B on the last English test.”

Gilbert hadn’t been ready for such a skillfully crafted comeback, and he stood with his mouth slightly ajar, stubbornly shutting it when he realized he had nothing to counter with.

Matthew smirked indulgently, amused by the other’s silence. “A B *plus* if you wanna get technical.”

There was something about that deliciously smug smile of his that made Gilbert want to wipe it right off his face. With his lips. “Since when did you get to be such a smart-mouthed little shit?”

“Since I started hanging around one.”

Gilbert made a rather unique noise, something between a cackle and a snort, and the sound alone had Matthew near tears.

“Get over here, *nerd*.” Matthew gasped softly as Gilbert took his hand, pulling him closer and bringing Matthew’s arm around his own. “We’re going to my room.”

“A-Alright.” Matthew brought his other hand to rest at Gilbert’s forearm, ignoring the strong and sudden urge to bury his face in his sweater. *God*, Matthew thought, why did Gilbert have to smell so nice? Why couldn’t he smell like something that didn’t make his eyes want to roll into the back of his head?

“Woah there, Mattie.”

“H-Huh?” This was it, he was done for. He’d made a face, inhaled too loudly, done *something* that had given him away, and now Gilbert thought he was a total freak.

Gilbert smirked, looking down at the hand at his arm. “You’re gonna need a permit to handle guns like these.”

“...Oh my God.”

Gilbert couldn't have been more pleased at the way Matthew's palm came to cover his face, his head bowing to the floor. "Tell me how awesome that was."

"Just walk, Gilbert." His voice was muffled behind his hand as he shook his head, lips quivering.

"You know you wanna laugh."

"*Walk*."

Gilbert made sure to point out where the bathrooms were as they passed them, helping Matthew familiarize himself with the layout of his house. He also made sure to snag the takeout menu hanging from the fridge as they cut through the kitchen; they had decided on pizza for later. To hold themselves until then, Gilbert grabbed a few snacks, sodas, and other highly-processed junk before they headed upstairs to his room, which didn't stay clean for long.

Gilbert glared at all the notebooks and worksheets and assorted supplies scattered about his floor before returning his attention to contents of his backpack. "Where the hell is this book?" he grumbled, digging around while he squinted inside.

"You'd know where it was if you had actually been reading it." Matthew smiled from his spot at the foot of Gilbert's bed, flipping through his book for the page he had left off on. "Ow!" He winced and rubbed his forehead, picking up the little piece of rubber that had landed in his lap. "Did you...did you just throw an eraser at me?"

"Me?" Gilbert smirked, unzipping the little pockets at the front of his backpack. "C'mon, Mattie, I thought we were friends."

"Some friend you are," Matthew said, smiling to himself as he resumed flipping through his book. "You'd better be glad that your bed is so comfortable."

"Saved by the bed." Gilbert grinned as he finally came across what he was looking for. He grabbed the battered copy of *1984* from his bag, worn from weeks of prolonged neglect and abuse, and began stuffing the rest of his things back inside.

Matthew couldn't help snickering as he listened to the other's hasty movements, zippers closing, papers crumpling as he crammed them into his bag. "I really didn't think you'd be so eager to do this, Gil."

Gilbert scoffed. "I'm not," he said, tossing his backpack into his closet. "But I have a limited amount of time with you and I'm not gonna let George fucking Orwell take it all up." He paused just as the last word left his mouth, his ears turning red as he realized he had spoken his thoughts aloud.

It was true though, thought Gilbert. The dead guy was the very definition of a third wheel, and the sooner they got through his stupid book, the better. His hand lingered on the doorknob. He hadn't closed his closet yet, and he toyed with the idea of shutting himself inside. Fortunately for Gilbert, his more rational thoughts came to drown out the rest, and he

slowly closed the door, turning around to find a shy smile on his friend’s lips. Just the sight of Matthew’s face, as flushed as he was sure his own was, made any and all uncertainty he’d been feeling vanish.

“Well,” Matthew replied, pushing a few strands of hair behind his ear, “let’s get to it then.”

“Yeah.”

Matthew’s face grew warmer as he felt the bed dip under Gilbert’s weight. "Could you hand me one of your pillows?"

"Oh, uh, yeah." Gilbert reached behind himself and grabbed one of the two propped against the headboard, placing it in Matthew's lap. "You can have both if you want, you know."

Matthew simply shook his head. "This one's perfect." He took a few moments to fluff it between his hands and then promptly swung it straight into Gilbert's face. He enjoyed himself a laugh at the sounds of Gilbert groaning. "We're still friends, aren't we?"

The expression of exaggerated innocence on Matthew's face didn't last long at all, morphing into an impish grin that had Gilbert reaching for pillow number two. Matthew gasped as the bed began to shake with Gilbert's movements. "You sneaky little—”

"Ah! No, wait!" he cried and jerked backwards, taking refuge against the wall.

"Don't start things you can't finish, Matthew," said Gilbert, bringing his pillow down on Matthew's head. Matthew burst into laughter, bringing his pillow to shield his face. But Gilbert was quick to react, overcome with a wicked glee as he pummeled Matthew's shoulder, his stomach, his hip—anywhere he deemed worthy of his revenge. "You give up?" Gilbert asked, laughing just as hard as he was swinging. "Gilbert Beilschmidt is awesome! Say it and I'll stop!"

"No!"

"You sure about that?"

But little did Gilbert know, Matthew was buying himself time. He could hear Gilbert beginning to pant, and knew that it was now he who had the upper hand. And so he made his move. Gilbert jumped back as Matthew lunged at him, his pillow falling to the floor in his surprise. With his back against his headboard he had nowhere else to go, and he grimaced as he got another blow to his face. Matthew swung wildly, not caring what it was he was hitting as long as it was attached to the boy in front of him.

"Gilbert Beilschmidt is a huge *dork*!" he shouted. "How's that?"

It all came to a swift end when Gilbert lunged back at Matthew, so quickly that Matthew hadn't even the slightest moment to react. Matthew's pillow joined Gilbert's on the floor as he landed on his back, laughing so hard he managed to snort. He clasped a hand to his mouth in an attempt to reel himself back at in, but then Gilbert gasped out that he couldn't breathe and Matthew lost it again.

Slowly, they came down from their shared high, their laughter replaced by soft pants. Only when silence filled the room did the two become aware of their bodies. Matthew could feel himself sinking into the bed. Could feel the indents of Gilbert's hands at either side of his head, the little dips of Gilbert's knees at his hips, pressing into the mattress. The hairs covering his forehead moved in time with Gilbert's shallow breaths, tickling his skin. And he realized that he couldn't move. But what shocked him most was the realization that he didn't necessarily *want* to. What was *wrong* with him? If his heart thumped any louder he was sure he might go deaf.

Gilbert looked at his hands, almost as if he'd forgotten that they were his. Matthew's hair was fanned out across his bed in waves, looking every bit as soft as the sheets beneath them. And it was like being stolen by the ocean's tide. He couldn't escape it. He was being sucked in, losing himself in Matthew's everything. In the way his cheeks had reddened. In the way his chest rose and fell. In the bow of his parted lips and the distinct color of his eyes. And then he realized that Matthew was no longer in front of him, or beside him, but *beneath* him. Breath catching, he quickly pulled himself back to give Matthew space, thinking that maybe he should've locked himself inside his closet after all.

Matthew sat himself up and tried not to think about how red his face was, because there was no doubt in his mind that it was. From all the laughing, obviously. "Truce?"

Gilbert smirked, picking up his pillows from the floor along with their books. "Only if you admit that there are *two* dorks in this room," he answered.

"It's true," he said. He smiled as Gilbert placed his novel in his hands. "You're contagious."

"Who says I didn't get it from you?"

Matthew scoffed. "'What's your sign?'" he quoted, chuckling at the memory. "That was you, not me."

"Yeah." Gilbert stretched himself across the bed and plopped a pillow on Matthew's lap. "And you started a pillow fight, so I'd say we're about even."

Matthew fought against a smile as Gilbert's head settled into his lap. "Touché."

"So what are we looking for again?" asked Gilbert. He scanned over the text in his book, reminded of why he'd left it untouched in his backpack for as long as he had. "Something about 'realized emotions?'"

"That's right. We just need an example in the novel that demonstrates that theme." Matthew pursed his lips while he went through more pages. "I'm trying to find the part where Winston meets Julia in the countryside, and they, you know..."

“When they fuck?" Gilbert felt Matthew tense a little and snickered. "Isn't that in Book Two?" he asked, more to himself than Matthew. It didn't take long to discover that he was indeed right. “Yeah, it's right here, on page 462.”

“Geez, Gilbert.” Matthew spread his fingers across said page, face reddening when he found that his friend wasn't joking. “Why is *this* the only thing you remember so well?”

He shrugged, grinning lopsidedly. “It’s the only thing that wasn’t completely boring.”

“Uh-huh.”

Gilbert snickered again and peeped up from his book for a glimpse of the other’s rosy cheeks. They were a far better sight than what lie between the covers of this book, that Gilbert knew for sure. His eyes softened as they fell on Matthew's sweater, riddled with a mixture of snowflakes and reindeer and the jolliest of gingerbread men.

“God, Matthew.”

“What?”

“That sweater is hideous.”

Matthew smiled, puffing out his chest. “Isn’t it? I told Alfred to show me to the ugliest ones he could find, and then I bought the ugliest of them all.” He laughed as a thought came to him. “My papa begged me to let him return it.”

"Hmm." Gilbert turned his head slightly to look down at Matthew's covered feet. “Your socks aren’t too bad.” He laughed at the way Matthew deflated, a pout coming to his face.

“I couldn’t find my others.” He wiggled his toes through his socks, one red and the other green. “Papa probably stole them from the wash,” he mumbled.

Gilbert shrugged. “I don’t blame him. I mean, Rudolph socks that glow in the dark? Those were the worst."

“There’s nothing wrong with being festive,” he insisted, sticking up his nose. “Now, stop distracting us!”

“*Ja*, okay,” Gilbert laughed. “For real this time.”

“Wanna read the first paragraph?”

“On it.”

“What did you do to my dog?”

Gilbert frowned and plopped himself on the floor next to Matthew, sending a glare at the retriever in Matthew’s lap. He watched with unbridled envy as Aster melted under Matthew’s touch, tongue hanging slack from her mouth. She buried her nose in the crook of Matthew’s neck and Gilbert narrowed his eyes at the canine, convinced she had done it to spite him. First that Orwell bastard and now his own dog; he just couldn’t catch a break.

Matthew flashed him a smile, running his hands along Aster’s back. “Jealous? That she likes me more than you?” Gilbert flushed and tore his eyes away from the unsightly couple,

relegating himself to the TV. Like hell she liked him more than he did, Gilbert thought, lips set in a stubborn pout. The impeccably handsome, undeniably charming, supremely awesome Gilbert Beilschmidt was jealous. Of a dog. He really was losing it.

“Whatever,” he scoffed. “Take this soda before I drink it myself.”

“Thanks.” He smirked as Gilbert placed the can in his hand. “I’ll savor it.” Aster whimpered at the loss of Matthew’s touch and the boy laughed and apologized, patting her head before she left his lap to curl up in front of the fireplace.

A loud pop filled the room, and then a sharp gasp. Gilbert’s eyes grew wide when they fell on Matthew. He was frozen, his mouth agape, brown foam running down his hand and onto his clothes. He sat there drenched in soda, a shiver spiking through his body as he felt the sweet, sticky liquid soak through his jeans.

“Shit.” The single expletive wasn’t nearly enough to communicate Gilbert’s shock. “Shit, shit, shit,” he continued, scrambling over to the stunned boy from where he sat. “Fuck, I’m so sorry, Mattie.”

Gilbert took the fizzing can of cola from his hand and Matthew smirked, wiping his palms on his now soiled sweater. “I didn’t think you were *that jealous.”*

“I *swear* I didn’t know it would do that.” He set the drink on the coffee table and shook his hands dry.

“I’m only kidding, Gil. Do we have any napkins left?”

“Napkins, napkins…” His eyes darted wildly about the table, spotting a decent pile of napkins beneath the empty pizza boxes. “Got ‘em.” He quickly handed them off to Matthew, nodding as he expressed his gratitude. He began wiping at his clothes and once he was finished, he faced Gilbert, tilting his head in question.

“How did I do?”

“Uh…you kinda missed a bit to your left.”

"Here?"

"Little more to the right."

"Like this?"

All Gilbert could manage was an awkward laugh. “I’ll be right back. Stay here.”

Matthew made to protest, but Gilbert had already left the room before he could utter the first word. He leaned back against the couch and sat in bewildered silence, yelping when a bundle of something soft hit his face, falling into his lap.

“What is this?” he asked, taking the bundle into his hands.

“My clothes. Wear ‘em.”

“W-What?”

“They’re clean,” he chuckled. “If that’s what you’re wondering.”

"No, I…” His eyes shifted downwards and then back up again. “Gilbert, it’s fine, really I—”

“You really think I’m gonna let you sit here covered in soda?” He crossed his arms definitively at his chest. “I’ll give you my clothes, you’ll give me yours to throw in the wash, and you won’t have to spend the next hour smelling like root beer. Deal?”

Judging from the way Gilbert’s voice sounded, Matthew figured he didn’t really have a choice. “Alright. I’ll...be back in a minute I guess.”

Gilbert didn’t say much when Matthew came out of the bathroom, and for that Matthew was grateful. He was sure his face would spontaneously combust if it got any hotter than it already was. Gilbert called him over to where he lie in front of the fireplace, and Matthew sat down next to him, bringing his knees to his chest. He could hear Aster's soft breaths from her little spot in front of the fire and smiled to himself. His eyes fluttered shut as he breathed in the scent of the boy next to him. It was everywhere, it was *on* him and his head was reeling. That a mere T-shirt and a pair of sweatpants could make him feel like this was embarrassing to say the least, but Matthew couldn't help himself. And he didn't really know if he cared to.

Gilbert watched him silently in the light of the fire, captivated by the way the light caught his hair, and the way his face gleamed as the flames danced within their hearth, bathing his whole body in a warm orange glow. His voice was so soft when he spoke that he had trouble believing it was his own. “You look so—” His breath caught in his throat as his mind caught up with his mouth, and his eyes widened as Matthew turned to face him.

“Hm?”

He gulped, suddenly aware of how fast his heart was racing. “You...You’re really pale.” A hand came to pull at his hair as he fell flat on his back, mouthing the words “fuck” and “me” as he brought his other hand to cover his face.

Matthew scoffed. “Says the albino.”

Gilbert froze, slowly sliding his hand down his face to look at Matthew, who was smirking at him. “How did you know that?”

“What?”

“About my albinism.”

"Oh." Matthew gave a sheepish laugh. "Alfred told me."

Gilbert didn't respond right away, and the two sat in momentary quiet. But it wasn't the usual lull in conversation. It was a bit longer than that. And suddenly Matthew's heart dropped, thinking that maybe his little retort had offended Gilbert in some way. He rushed to

apologize, but before he could get the words out Gilbert broke the silence with that ever impressive laugh of his. Its suddenness made Matthew jump.

“What? What’s funny?” Matthew only grew more uncomfortable as Gilbert’s laughter continued. While on the one hand he was relieved that what he'd said hadn't come off as insensitive, on the other, he was completely lost. Whatever it was that was so hilarious, Matthew wanted to know too, especially since he'd just given himself something short of a heart attack. "Gilbert!" he huffed, desperate to understand what he'd done to make himself so unintentionally amusing.

“All this time you've been wondering what I looked like, huh?" Gilbert sat up, a smug smirk on his face.

"W-What?" Matthew sputtered and hugged his knees tighter to his chest. "No, I haven't!"

"So desperate to know that you asked your brother to describe my every feature."

“No, I didn’t!" he insisted. "It just...came up in conversation!” Gilbert had settled himself in front of Matthew, his back to the fireplace.

"Here, let me help you out," he said, voice like suede. "People tell me I have a charming smile, dashing good looks, and—"

"Ugh," Matthew moaned, splaying his fingers across his face. “*Please* don't.”

"And eyes that shine like the purest rubie—"

“Shut up already!” Gilbert laughed some more as he was shoved to the floor, and Matthew had to stifle his own laughter. "God, I hate you," he mumbled, the words about as menacing as a three-day-old kitten.

"Liar," said Gilbert, finding his proof in the little grin on his friend's face. He heaved a contented sigh and got himself comfortable again, hands laced behind his head as he glanced up at the ceiling. "You know, it's not like I've been trying to hide it or anything."

"Hm? Hide what?"

"The way I look." He rolled over on his side to look at the other and felt himself blush. "I don't want you to think that I was." he said, picking at the carpet. "It's just that you never asked, so I never bothered."

Matthew brought his chin to rest on his knees. "If I had asked," he said softly, "would you have minded?"

Gilbert frowned. "Of course not. Why would I have?"

"I dunno," said Matthew, toes wiggling in his socks. "It's kind of a personal question."

"Maybe if we were strangers in some online chat room," he snorted. Matthew stayed silent, pressing his lips together, and Gilbert's smirk was replaced by a more sober expression.

"Mattie?"

"Eyes that shine like rubies, huh?" he said, finally giving in to his own curiosity. Matthew laughed softly and Gilbert blushed. How could words that sounded so ironically funny on his own tongue sound so unironically lame when repeated back to him? God dammit, he really was a dork.

"Yeah, well," Gilbert cleared his throat, rubbing at his neck. "Turns out they were supposed to be blue, like Lud's. But, you know, with albinism there's no pigment. The only color that comes through is from the blood vessels in my eyes, so they show up red. At least that's what the doc told my folks." He hunched his shoulders, stopping himself before he began to ramble. "I never really cared much about the details. It's pretty boring stuff."

"Says who?" Matthew stretched himself out alongside Gilbert, clasping his hands on his stomach. "I don't think so."

Gilbert shrugged again, watching Matthew's hair spill onto the carpet as he lie down. He had to keep himself from touching it. "Guess when you look at them in the mirror everyday it kinda loses the wow factor." Matthew turned his head in Gilbert's direction, and Gilbert's eyes locked onto Matthew's like magnets. Matthew smiled.

"But I thought Gilbert Beilschmidt was awesome." Gilbert didn't know how to feel about the little smile on the boy's lips. It was coy. It was playful. And it was making his blood rush. "You can't be awesome and boring at the same time, can you?"

It took a moment longer than Gilbert would have liked to think of a comeback, those teasing lips making his mind go blank. But he recovered, his tone artificially cool. "Glad to see you finally came to your senses."

Matthew sighed, bringing the back of his hand to his forehead. "It must be the heat. It's getting to me."

"Cute."

"I try."

Gilbert had to look back up at the ceiling, otherwise Matthew's face would be the death of him. He sighed softly into his bangs. "So..."

"Mmhm?"

"I don't really know how I should describe myself to you without sounding like a mail-order bride."

Matthew laughed, making his next words rather dubious. "I promise I won't laugh if you do."

"You planned this all along, didn't you?"

"I didn't, but I can't say I don't like where it's going." He grinned. "Just keep it simple."

"Yeah, okay. Simple." Gilbert looked away, running a hand through his hair. "I think we've already established that I'm pretty damn white. Other than that, I'm blond. Short hair. Tall."

He laughed, not having expected to feel this awkward. Never would he have thought that something as simple as describing his own appearance could feel so intimate an act. And maybe it wouldn't have been had Matthew not been the one listening. "Now that I'm saying it out loud, that could be anybody, really."

"But it's not anyone else," Matthew said, his voice soft as color rose to his cheeks. "It's you. I don't need a bunch of flowery words to know that."

Gilbert brought his eyes back to Matthew and could feel his chest begin to ache. Like it had when Matthew waved to him last Friday from the passenger seat of Alfred's car. This week had seemed to crawl like no other, slow and deliberate, like it had known he'd made plans this weekend, and was jealous of the company he'd be spending it with. But somehow Gilbert had made it through, and now Matthew was here. Laughing with him and smiling at him and making him wish there were more hours in a day. Matthew was here, lying with him on his living room floor, and he hated knowing that sooner or later, this spot next to him would be empty again.

"So," Gilbert said, so fixated on Matthew's profile that he failed notice the setting sun. "if I went missing tomorrow, I could count on you to give the cops a clear picture of me, right?"

Matthew smirked as he turned to Gilbert, clearly up for the challenge. "Let's see if I've got this right. A charming smile. *Dashing* good looks. Eyes that shine like the purest rubies." Gilbert watched the boy's lips as he spoke, and it wasn't long before he found himself grinning back, unable to suppress the part of himself that loved it when Matthew teased him. He couldn't help but laugh as Matthew finished with, "Tall, short blonde hair, and pretty damn white."

"Impressive."

"Aren't I?"

"Now, can you repeat that first part for me?"

Matthew rolled his eyes. "Your unbelievably good looks or your breathtaking smile?"

"Man, keep talking like that and you'll *really* get me going."

"Dork," Matthew scoffed.

"Nerd."

"Gladly, thank you." Matthew broke into a smile as he heard Gilbert snicker.

"I'm gonna go get another soda," Gilbert said as he sat up. "You want one?"

"No, thanks, I'm fine."

“Playing it safe this time, huh?”

Matthew gave a little smirk as he sat up as well. “Can you blame me?”

Gilbert laughed and got to his feet. "I'll be right back."

Matthew nodded and scooted himself back against the couch, the heat from the hearth still warm against his face. With Gilbert having disappeared into the next room and Aster still fast asleep in front of the fireplace, there wasn't much else Matthew could do but lose himself in his own thoughts. With his fingers playing at the collar of his borrowed shirt, he blushed. When he'd stood outside Gilbert's door just a few hours ago, Matthew never could have imagined he'd be stripping himself down in the boy's bathroom. This wasn't his house. These weren't his clothes and yet he felt so comfortable. *Gilbert* had made him feel so comfortable.

In sitting there Matthew realized just how happy he was that his little mantra hadn't held true. Because it hadn't been just homework. It was thumb wrestling for the last slice of pizza, and splitting it afterwards anyway. It was using pillows as swords and shields. It was lounging in front of the fire and laughing at each other's jokes. And wondering how soon they could do it all over again.

Gilbert hadn’t expected Matthew’s spot to be empty when he returned, but it wasn’t all that surprising to find him crouched down in front of the fireplace, warming his hands. Matthew had really taken a liking to that old thing. Gilbert just stood there for a moment, watching him from the doorway. He watched as Matthew took some time to spoil Aster even as she slept, running a hand along her shiny coat. That dog was becoming his enemy.

Matthew brought his attention back to the fire soon enough, pulling his hair back at his ear to let the heat warm his face. Beads of water ran down the can in Gilbert’s hand, past his fingers, cool against his hot skin. And he swallowed, not knowing why he hadn’t moved yet. Maybe it was because of how the room had grown dark. How the sky had turned purple. How the fire had dimmed. It was all a reminder of how much time had since passed. Of how little time they had left.

The flames danced slowly, mournfully, as if they could read Gilbert’s mind. They would vanish soon. And so would Matthew. But dammit if Gilbert was going to sit back and watch the time slip away, stand here like an idiot when Matthew was right in front of him, making his house feel like a home. With Matthew here Gilbert could feel it, the life being breathed into each room. He wanted these walls to absorb every bit of their laughter, every giggle, snort, whisper, and sigh. He wanted Matthew to be there even after he was gone.

Gilbert’s ears were burning because, fuck, Ludwig was right. Ludwig was right, and now he had to pretend like this arrow jammed through his heart wasn’t really there. He pushed himself forward to claim his spot near the fireplace, leaving his soda abandoned on the coffee table. He caught the tail end of Matthew’s chuckling as he approached.

“What are you laughing at?” he asked. Matthew turned his head around in Gilbert’s direction and quickly waved him over. Gilbert wasn’t all that sure about what it was that had Matthew so excited, but as long as it kept Matthew smiling like that, he didn’t care what it was.

“Listen,” he whispered as Gilbert sat down next to him, pointing to his left, where Aster lie. “Do you hear that?”

Gilbert narrowed his eyes. “Hear what?”

“She’s *snoring*.” He laughed again, the sound soft and breathy in his attempt to not disturb her. “I didn’t even know dogs could do that.”

“Oh.” Gilbert snorted. “Yeah, she does that sometimes. Probably tired herself out from all the excitement today.”

“What happened today?” he asked, hands steady smoothing at the retriever’s soft coat.

“What do you mean?” Gilbert scoffed. “*You* happened. She was pretty happy to see a new face. But I’m sure you could already tell by how she tackled you the floor.”

Matthew grinned. “What a handshake that was.”

“Still didn’t keep you from spoiling her every chance you get.”

“What?” Matthew feigned ignorance, rubbing at what little of Aster’s belly was exposed. “I don’t spoil her. If anything, she spoils me.”

“Oh yeah?”

“Yeah.” Matthew sighed. “I’ve never had any pets before, so…”

“Never?”

Matthew shook his head. “Unless you’re counting goldfish. But we could have had an empty fish bowl and I wouldn’t have known the difference. Fish don’t do anything.”

Gilbert didn’t know if Matthew was aware that he was pouting, but he was enjoying it nonetheless. “You’ve never thought about getting a guide dog?”

“I have,” the boy said through a wistful sigh. “I’ve actually wanted one since I was nine or ten, but my dad has really severe pet allergies, so that was never gonna happen.” He stretched his arms over his head and gave a little grunt of satisfaction. Gilbert pretended not to notice the way his own T-shirt rode up Matthew’s back. “Now I know where I can get my fix.”

“Oh, so my dog is worth another visit, but I’m not?”

Matthew rolled his eyes as far as his prosthetics would allow him, shaking his head for good measure. “How could I ever forget *the* Gilbert Beilschmidt?” he said, facetious as ever. “The boy whose eyes shine like the purest rubies.”

Gilbert blushed again, the same way he had when Matthew shot those words back at him the first time. It was pretty clear that Matthew wasn’t going to let that horrible joke have the quick death that it deserved, and for that Gilbert had no one to blame but himself. But it was fine, because Matthew had just given him enough ammo to return fire.

“You’re still thinking about my face, huh?” He reveled in how quickly the smirk dropped from Matthew’s face. “Must’ve left a good impression.”

“What?” Matthew scoffed. “God, you’re so lame.”

Gilbert shrugged. “Can’t be all that lame if you’re daydreaming about my beautiful face.”

“You’re not funny.”

“*Ach ja*? Then why are you smiling?”

“Shut up, Gilbert.”

Gilbert didn’t focus so much on the words themselves as much as the way Matthew had laughed them out. Even with the room so dim Gilbert could just make out the faintest bit of red blooming in the apples of his friend’s cheeks. Matthew looked as if he wanted to say something more, and Gilbert’s eyes fell to the boy’s lips as they parted. But all that came out was shy, almost nervous laugh.

“You’re the *last* person I should be admitting this to,” he said. “Your head’s already big enough as it is.”

“Huh? Admitting what?” Matthew’s expression was sheepish, adorably so, leaving Gilbert’s mouth a little drier than before.

“I’d be lying if I said I was never curious about what you look like,” he said. There was nothing witty or humorous in his tone, and so Gilbert could only stare dumbly at him. Matthew was the only person he knew who could make the color red so contagious. “I haven’t always been blind, so…I wonder sometimes.”

“What people look like, you mean?” Gilbert was answered with a nod.

“People I’m close to, yeah. When you’re around someone enough, of course you get a little curious,” he chuckled. “I can’t even count how many times I’ve thought about what Al must look like now. Or my parents.”

“Do you…not remember what they look like?”

Matthew broke into a smile. “I do. I remember their faces more than anything. They’re the last people I saw.”

“Before your surgery.”

Matthew nodded again. “I was so young that I don’t remember much of anything about that day. Most everything I know is from the things my parents’ve told me. But the one thing I do remember is telling myself that I just *had* to remember their faces.”

Gilbert’s eyes never left Matthew’s face, even after he went silent. He was reminiscing; Gilbert could see as much from the smile he wore. It wasn’t even directed at him and yet Gilbert still found himself feeling warm because of it. It reminded him of all the stupid jokes

he'd told when they first met. Reminded him of how desperate he'd been to see Matthew smile like this, openly, at ease. It would never grow old. He listened contentedly as Matthew's voice coasted over the sounds of crackling wood, soft and soothing.

"Dad," Matthew laughed, "he has these really bushy eyebrows. Al and I used to call them his caterpillars. Papa likes to keep his hair long, a bit longer than mine, and he's got scruff on his face. Dad always nags at him when it grows too long."

"And Alfred?" Gilbert couldn't help grinning as the other laughed again.

"Al always had this cheesy grin on his face. I used to wonder how he smiled so wide without his face cracking open. And…he had this little cowlick on one side of his head. He would never sit still when our parents tried to comb it down. Not that it ever worked."

"He's still got it."

"Pfft. Yeah, I thought so. Though I haven't heard him complain about it since middle school."

"Goes around smiling like he's in a Colgate commercial, too. Sounds to me like his looks haven't changed as much as you think."

"Maybe not," he said, smiling to himself. "But…I've never seen him with glasses. He's had to wear them since fourth grade, but I still can't picture what he'd look like in them, so I…" He trailed off, leaning back a bit on his hand. "I wonder sometimes. I mean, just yesterday Papa was dyeing his gray hairs again. Every time I smell the dye he uses, I always wonder what he'd look like with gray hair. I just can't imagine it." He blushed, sinking his nails into the carpet. "It's stupid, I know. It's not like I'll ever really know. Or that it even matters."

"No, it's not. Like you said, you weren't born blind. You haven't actually seen Alfred or your folks since you were a kid. How could you *not* be curious?" Matthew didn't respond right away, but his flushed face had become even more apparent, a deeper color than before. For Gilbert, it was as good a response as any.

"This is kind of embarrassing," he said after a pause, "but there are times where I wonder what *I* look like. I mean, of course I know what I look like. Only, the last time I saw myself I was, like, four." Gilbert laughed then, in a little huff that Matthew nearly missed. But the words that followed were unmistakable.

"You're fucking adorable, Matthew. That's all you need to know."

For the first time ever, Gilbert hadn't blurted out his thoughts by mistake. And although it felt like someone had lit a match on his face, he had no desire to take it back. He looked over at Matthew, whose face was a pretty pink, blue eyes cast down to the floor. He nearly stopped breathing when they landed on him. His lips, as lovely a pink as was on his cheeks, curled into the gentlest smile and slowly parted.

And then Matthew's phone rang. He apologized and quickly dug in his pocket, pulling out the phone and bringing it to his ear. "H-Hello?"

“Hey, Matt.”

“Al?”

Gilbert deflated. Orwell, Aster, and now he could add Steve Rogers Jr. to the list. While Matthew spoke, he glanced back at the front window, where Alfred’s headlights shown through the open blinds. It was dark outside. He took out his own phone to check the time and frowned at what he saw staring back at him. How the hell had it already gotten so late?

“Yeah, bro. What’s wrong?” asked Alfred. “You sound out of breath.”

“It’s nothing.” Matthew shook his foggy head, trying to figure out how to breathe normally again. “What’s up?” His eyes narrowed when he heard giggling in the background, followed by his brother cursing.

“Huh? What do you mean? I’m here to pick you up.”

“O-Oh!” Matthew forced a laugh. “Right. Right.”

“I’ll be waiting outside, ‘kay?”

“Yeah...yeah I’ll be out in a sec.”

“Cool. W-Will you stay on your fucking side of the car, dammit?” Matthew sighed as Alfred hung up. His attention was quickly brought back to Gilbert as he spoke.

“Time flies, huh?”

“Yeah…” said Matthew, slipping his phone back into his pocket. “I didn’t mean to waste so much time rambling about myself. Sorry.”

“Mattie, if I didn’t like hearing you talk, you think I would’ve invited you over?”

Matthew smiled as Gilbert took his hand, and allowed himself to be pulled to his feet. “I guess I can’t really argue with that.”

“Hey, don’t look so sad,” he laughed. “You keep looking like that and I’ll have to keep you here.”

“Let’s do this again?” It came out as more of a question, and Gilbert was quick to answer it.

“Hell yeah.”

"Alright," he chuckled. “I’ve just gotta change real quick. Your dryer’s in your basement, right?”

“Yeah, it’s—“ Gilbert froze, leaving Matthew in a brief moment of speechless confusion. And then he cursed.

“What?”

“I…forgot to switch them over to the dryer.”

“Gil!”

“Hey, I didn’t do it on purpose! I guess I didn’t hear it buzz,” he mumbled.

“Well, what am I supposed to do?” Matthew huffed, wearing another one of those pouts that Gilbert couldn’t seem to get enough of. “Go outside in your pajamas?”

Gilbert stared at him. “Well…they’re a pretty good fit.”

Matthew regretted getting in the car the moment he shut the door.

“Mattie, what are you wearing...”

Matthew fumbled with his seatbelt. "Can we *please* just go?"

"Why are you in his clothes?" Those baggy pants stuffed inside his boots definitely weren't his brother's beloved blue jeans. Even with Matthew trying to hide his face in his scarf Alfred could see the shade of red painted all over it. Ivan glanced over at the side view mirror from the passenger seat, watching Matthew’s reflection squirm.

“Perhaps Matvey would like to keep private matters private,” he cooed.

“Private matters, my ass!”

“There are no ‘private matters,’” Matthew groaned. “Just drive the damn car, Al!”

“But—”

“*Step on it, dammit.*”

Chapter End Notes

> Gilbert's having albinism has been a part of fanon lore for I don't know how long now, and I know the idea has kind of stuck for many of us in the fandom, but I did just want to mention (for those who may not know) that in real life cases of albinism in humans, the color of the irises always appears blue, not red. This is unfortunately a misconception that has been popularized by popular movies and TV shows, and while its a common trope in fiction, it's completely unheard of IRL.
>
> In other words, my explanation for Gilbert's eye color is shameless pseudo-medical bullshit ¯_(ツ)_/¯

Good Luck

Chapter Summary

In which everyone is wondering when the hell it's going to be official.

Chapter Notes

This chapter is a little different than those before it in that it isn't very linear. Some scenes in this chapter take place during events in chapters 6 and 7, scenes that were purposely left out with this chapter in mind. Other scenes won't make sense until you reach the very end. And lastly, as of this chapter, the M rating has officially become relevant. With that in mind, please continue on, and enjoy.

⠠⠍⠁⠞⠞⠊⠑

Matthew was supposed to be doing homework, but instead he found himself standing awkwardly in front of his brother's bedroom door. He gulped, fiddling with the drawstrings of his hoodie, doing his best to ignore the pit at the bottom of his stomach. His breaths were mechanical, his mouth unbelievably dry, and for the slightest second he had the sudden urge to turn around and forget he had ever even considered what he was about to do. He shook his head, scolding himself for letting his nerves get the better of him. He *needed* to do this. With a soft sigh, he brought his knuckles to his brother's door, his whole body tensing as he registered the call of his name.

"Mattie?"

"Al," he gasped and whipped around, a hand clutched to his chest. "I, uh, thought you were in your room."'

"Well, I was," Alfred said, eyes rolling, "but I had to go re-park the car. You know how Dad bitches about me not leaving him enough room." Alfred watched as the other nodded in understanding, a nervous laugh leaving his lips. It didn't take very long for him to notice the unsettling lack of color in his brother's face, and he frowned slightly, slipping his car keys in his back pocket.

"You ok, br−"

"Yeah, I-I'm fine," he answered, a little too quickly for Alfred's liking. He narrowed his eyes, crossing his arms at his chest. There had to be something more than he was letting on,

especially seeing as Matthew had yet to move from in front of his door.

“You were about to knock on my door, weren’t you? You need something?” Alfred watched as soft blue eyes fell to the floor, and then off to the side.

“Can we talk?”

Alfred was taken aback by how the timidly Matthew spoke. While his voice had always been on the softer side, that shyness he was hearing was reserved for strangers, and Alfred damn sure wasn’t a stranger. Matthew winced as a hand came to ruffle his hair.

“What’s with that face? You think I was gonna say no or something?” Alfred chuckled, clicking open his door. “Get in here.” Matthew shuffled past him inside, pouting as he blew a few hairs away from his flushed face.

Alfred gently closed the door behind him, frowning when he saw his brother seated in his desk chair, shoulders tense, wringing his hands in his lap. “Matt,” he said, “I swear to god, if —”

“Al,” he sighed, “no one’s bothering me.” Alfred released a breath of his own, relieved that, once again, his suspicions were wrong. It was a reflex sort of thing his mind did; he couldn't help it.

“You can’t come in here lookin’ like that and expect me not to ask,” he said, yanking his brother’s hood playfully over his head, which he pulled back with a pout. “So, what’s up?”

Matthew licked his dry lips, his mouth opening, closing, and then opening again, only for him to realize that he couldn’t find his voice. Even louder than the thumping in his chest was the voice in his head telling him to *just say it already, dammit*, and yet his sweaty palms and gurgling stomach were pleading with him to *just drop it*. Matthew released a shaky sigh, and with it came his answer, the words rushing suddenly and awkwardly from his mouth as if he had just remembered how to speak. His mouth snapped shut just as quickly as it had opened. But it was already too late.

Alfred smiled just short of splitting his face in two.

Gilbert shrieked as he slammed Matthew’s locker shut, jerking backwards when he found himself face-to-face with his newfound frenemy. Quickly, he looked all around himself, red eyes darting around to confirm that no one had witnessed such an unawesomely vulnerable display. Fortunately enough for Gilbert, there was enough hustle and bustle in the halls to drown out the pathetic sound. He scoffed as the other giggled behind his hand and conjured up the nastiest glare he could manage with his heart still pounding the way that it was. Ivan smiled in spite of the pale middle finger that emerged from Gilbert’s pocket.

“Did I frighten you, my friend?”

“Why the hell are you sneaking around here? Don’t just walk up on people like that, you fucking creep!”

He rolled his eyes at the smile on Ivan's face. It was the same disturbingly sweet smile that he'd come to know his freshman year, still as unsettling and annoying as it was the year before. Now, thanks to Gilbert's friendship with Matthew, Matthew's relation to Alfred, and Alfred's subtle-but-not-really-subtle boyfriend status with Ivan, Gilbert had come to tolerate him, mostly out of respect for Alfred, and with gentle coaxing from Matthew.

"He's really nice once you get to know him," Matthew had said, a knowing smile tugging at his lips. "Evidently Alfred doesn't hate him as much as he thought he did." He hated to admit it, but Matthew had been right. Ivan was still an asshole, though.

"It is not my fault you did not hear me approach," Ivan reasoned. "Perhaps you are going deaf?"

"Oh, you didn't know? My ears kinda do this thing where they tune out assholes."

"Hm? What was that?"

"I said—"

"Ah, I'm thinking my ears suffer from the same condition." Gilbert emitted something between a scoff and a laugh.

"Look, I've got places to be. What do you want?"

"Yes, places to be." Gilbert glanced down at Ivan's out stretched hand, where a small slip of paper sat folded between his fingers. Curious, he took the paper from Ivan, quickly unfolding it to read its contents. It was from Alfred. "After school @ 3," it read. And apparently he had to "be there or else!!!" There was an address too. Gilbert looked up from the big, bold handwriting and over at Ivan, laughing.

"What, are we in third grade? Why couldn't he just text me?"

"There are reasons," Ivan said vaguely. Gilbert rolled his eyes and looked down at the paper once more.

"Meet him for what?" he asked, pale brows scrunching together. Much to his frustration, Ivan only smiled and put a finger to his lips.

"It would be in your best interest to go," he said.

"And if I don't?"

"You will go." Gilbert shrunk back a little as Ivan took a step forward, his smile sickly sweet. "I could take you there myself if you would like that better."

"Back off, Putin, I'll go, alright? Sheesh. Not like I had other awesome things to do today…" he mumbled.

"Good. Matvey must not know about this, yes?"

“Huh? Wait—”

“*Udachi*.”

“Wait!” Gilbert grumbled as Ivan walked off, cursing his ignorance of the Russian language. With a huff, he looked down at the paper in his hand, wondering just what the hell was going on.

“Gil?” He whipped around when Matthew’s voice reached his ears.

“Mattie!” Matthew snickered at the way his voice cracked. “W-When did you get here?”

“A few seconds ago,” the boy said with a small smirk. His fingers twisted and turned at his combination lock, ears perked as he listened for each click. “I didn’t know you talked to yourself, Gil.”

Gilbert flushed. “I wasn’t! I was talking to Ivan.” *Shit*, was he supposed to say that?

“Ivan?" His voice echoed from inside his locker as he fished through it, smiling to himself when he came across Gilbert's jacket and scarf and books and other belongings that had accumulated over the course of the year. "What did he want?”

“Nothing!” He shoved the paper into his pocket, clearing his throat. Smooth, stealthy, awesome. No one could do it better than Gilbert Beilschmidt. “Ready to head to lunch?”

Matthew grabbed hold of his lunch box and shut the door with a soft click. “Yep.”

By three in the afternoon, Gilbert was exactly where he was supposed to be, and had he been meeting anybody else but Alfred, he would have questioned whether or not he was in the right place. A soft chuckle left him as his gaze fell upon a twin pair of golden arches and he shook his head, walking into the tiny establishment. Now Alfred’s last minute text about “sitting near Ronald” made a whole lot more sense. He gave a small nod and a wink to the girl behind the counter as he passed, steering clear of the squealing children that sprinted by him with their kids meals in tow.

It wasn’t long before Gilbert found the two men he was looking for, their friend Ronald plastered to a nearby bench with a smile that made his skin crawl, his arm draped unnaturally over the bench as if inviting Gilbert to take a seat at his side. Much to Gilbert’s relief, Alfred was seated in a booth a comfortable distance away from the creepy-ass statue, tapping away at his phone while he sipped on something sweet. Alfred looked up as he heard Gilbert approach.

“Sup, dude,” he said with a grin, holding out a lidded cup as Gilbert greeted him. “Got you a McFlurry.”

As Gilbert slipped inside the booth opposite of Alfred, he slowly took the shake and mumbled his thanks, appreciating the gesture, but confused all the same. There was something in Alfred’s eyes that Gilbert couldn’t quite discern, but there was one thing of

which he was absolutely certain. Alfred hadn't brought him all the way there just to give him free ice cream.

"It's too fucking cold for this shit," Lovino grumbled to himself, cranking up the heat with one hand and warming the other with his own breath.

Santa Claus is Coming to Town was playing on the radio, and it was driving him insane. Not the song itself, but the fact that it was probably the fifteenth damn Christmas song he'd heard in the past hour. Antonio had turned to some stupid Christmas station, and the only reason Lovino hadn't changed it was because everything else was full of static, and he wasn't about to listen to fucking static. He would've turned it off completely, but the part of him that went weak in the knees for Antonio's singing voice prevented him from doing so. He'd play *Feliz Navidad* on fucking repeat if Antonio was singing along to it. Not that he'd ever admit that. He shuddered and stuffed his hands into his coat pockets, frantic fingers groping around for his gloves. He couldn't put them on fast enough. With a pout, he brought his hands once again to his mouth, rubbing them together while he stole glances at his boyfriend through the rear view mirror.

Lovino couldn't help the way his lips quirked behind his gloved hands, a soft huff of laughter leaving him as he watched Antonio scrape ice off the back windshield. He looked happy as can be, smiling that idiotic smile of his even as he stood in the middle of the ear-biting cold. Shaking his head, Lovino sunk back into his seat, peering lazily into the mirror to watch snowflakes coat Antonio's chocolate brown hair. It was only when he realized that Antonio was staring back at him that he tore his eyes away, a flush rising to his cheeks. Scoffing softly, he opened his door and called out loud enough for Antonio to hear.

"Hurry up and get in here before you freeze your ass off!"

Antonio laughed as he slipped behind the wheel, quickly shutting the door when Lovino complained about him letting all the heat out. "You missed me, didn't you?"

"No." Antonio hummed thoughtfully as he shifted his beanie on his head.

"So those pretty red cheeks aren't for me, then?"

"It's fucking cold outside," Lovino replied. "Bastard," he added under his breath, turning towards the window in an attempt to save face. He gasped as two arms came to hug him from behind, a chilled nose nuzzling the nape of his neck.

"*Ay, eres tan lindo*," he sighed into the warmth of the Lovino's skin.

"Yeah, and you're too damn cold," Lovino mumbled, although he made no attempts to break free of the other's grasp. Instead he folded his arms at his chest, leaning back as they both fell into a comfortable quiet, the gentle sound of the heater whirring in the background. *Jingle Bell Rock* had started playing.

"So, how much longer are we waiting for these idiots?" Lovino glared through the window at the crowds of people pouring out of the movie theater, not exactly thrilled about the

overpriced food, shitty kids, and mediocre service he was sure to encounter. This double-date thing was his stupid brother's idea.

"Hmm." Antonio pulled away and took out his phone to check the time. Feliciano and Ludwig were supposed to meet them at 2:30. It was 2:16. "We've still got time before the movie starts. Didn't Feli say they were close?"

"If they were really close, then they'd be here already," he said dryly.

"Crap…"

Lovino sat up and looked over at Antonio. He was staring at his phone, grimacing at its lit screen. "What? What's that face for?"

"Gil," he said, rubbing sheepishly at his neck. "He's been texting me all this time." He quickly scrolled through message after message, his guilt quickly replaced by amusement. "He's...really worked up over this study date of his."

"You're not serious."

"There's...fifteen messages here."

"What?" Lovino snorted. "Let me see that." Antonio handed it over and leaned forward on the steering wheel, eyes narrowing as he frowned in his confusion.

"But I didn't get any notifications…"

"Your phone's on silent, genius." He promptly flipped it back off.

"Oh."

"Ha!" Lovino laughed, his eyes scanning over blocks of text, each message more frantic than the one before it. The last message was sent an hour ago: a distressed string of question marks. "Oh my god. This is fucking *gold*."

Antonio leaned over to read along with Lovino, stifling his own laughter. "I didn't think he was that nervous. I feel a little bad though..."

Lovino scoffed and handed back the phone. "What an idiot. All that talk about that damn date, a date that Matthew doesn't even know he's on, and here he is about to shit himself."

Antonio leaned back in his seat, scrolling through his phone in awe. "I've never seen him get like this. Over anyone." He thought back to their years in junior high. "His crush on Liz wasn't even this bad, was it?"

"It's pretty obvious this shit's more than a crush."

Antonio smiled to himself, slipping his phone back into his pocket. "Love, then?"

Lovino shrugged and made a face, scrunching up his nose as if he'd smelled something foul. He wasn't particularly eager to speculate about the recent developments in his friend's love life. "How should I know?" He paused a moment before adding, "All I know is he's obsessed with the kid."

Antonio's hand lingered by his pocket. "Think it's too late to send him some encouragement?"

"As if he'd pay attention to his phone with Matt in front of him." He waved a dismissive hand. "He'll figure it out."

And Gilbert did figure it out, eventually, according to what Feliciano told them once he and Ludwig had finally arrived. Antonio had just returned from concessions with a sizable bucket of popcorn and drinks when Feliciano spotted them, pulling along a sheepish-looking Ludwig and waving animatedly as he greeted the two.

"Ooh, what's this?" Lovino recoiled and grimaced as his brother stepped forward, his gaze settling on the tiny gem in his left ear. Feliciano looked from his brother to Antonio and then his brother again, grinning. It was subtle enough, its glint just barely visible when Lovino tilted his head a certain way. But it was impossible for Feliciano to miss; that definitely hadn't been there when he'd seen his brother that morning. "An early Christmas gift?"

Lovino blushed, shoving him away. "So what if it is? What took you and wurst-for-brains so long?" he asked, quickly changing the subject. Feliciano smiled and sent a look Ludwig's way, to which Ludwig sighed and shrugged. Lovino was less than impressed. "The fuck's that supposed to mean?"

"Gilbert," Ludwig attempted to elaborate.

Feliciano giggled. "We had to keep Mattie company until Gil got home."

"Got home?" Antonio frowned. "Wasn't he already at home? I mean, Matthew met him at his house, right?"

"Matthew arrived before he did." The looks on Antonio's and Lovino's faces prompted Ludwig to further explain. He hadn't particularly wanted to, but knew that had he left the task to Feliciano, they would have more than likely missed their movie. He explained the situation as concisely as he could, starting from the moment Gilbert had left out the door with a leash in hand.

"What an *idiot*." Lovino couldn't help laughing as he said it.

"If only I had seen his messages," Antonio said with a sheepish grin. "I really didn't think he was so nervous."

"But everything worked out fine in the end," Feliciano assured them. "Gil was only a few minutes late. You guys should have seen the way they looked at each other!" he gushed.

“Yeah, if Matt could actually look.” Lovino smirked as Feliciano pouted and glared at him. He just couldn’t resist.

“*Well*, I saw the way he lit up when Gilbert got there. I wanted to see a little more, but *someone* made me leave.” He sent an accusatory glance at the boy at his side.

Ludwig sighed. “They needed their privacy.”

“Privacy?” Antonio smiled with anticipation. “Was something happening?”

“They were getting super close, weren’t they, Lud?”

Antonio nearly dropped his popcorn. “*Close*?”

Ludwig ran a hand through his hair and flushed slightly, looking awkwardly off to the side. “I have no interest in spying on my brother.” He jumped as a finger poked at his side.

“Aw, no fun! I know you saw it too.”

“Saw *what?* What were they doing?” Lovino rolled his eyes and sipped on his soda. They were really doing this.

“Gil was playing in Mattie’s hair.” Feliciano had heard what Gilbert had said, but the whole act was just a little too intimate to be taming a few fly aways. “It was really cute.”

Antonio deflated, humming disappointedly. “I was hoping for a kiss.”

“Who knows? Maybe today is the day?”

“Pft, I wish.”

Lovino froze as all eyes went on him, his face setting ablaze as he realized what he had just said. Antonio was pulling that stupid, *stupid* smile, his green eyes gleaming with mischief. Ludwig and Feliciano looked identical, their mouths hung open. He wanted punch them all in their stupid faces, but not before punching himself first; damn his stupid motherfucking tongue.

“You *wish?” Feliciano repeated.*

“But I thought you didn’t care, Lovi?”

“I don’t,” he said, his nose pointing stubbornly to the ceiling. “But I’m tired of this shit. It’s been three fucking months. Three!" he repeated for emphasis. "What they need to do is get the hell together already. I'm sick of hearing you nosy jackasses gossiping about them every damn day. So yeah, I fucking wish.”

The four of them stood there inside the theater, Lovino’s face burning hotter with each passing moment in which none of them spoke, three pairs of eyes still on him. Slowly, Feliciano cracked a smile, and even Ludwig’s features had softened with a little smirk of his own. Antonio looked especially punchable.

“Fix your fucking faces,” he grumbled, shoving his straw back into his mouth. Stupid motherfucking tongue.

Matthew awoke that night with a start, eyes snapping open. His lips parted with a soft gasp, chest tightening with the sudden intake of air. He lie motionless in his bed, lashes fluttering against his pillowcase as he blinked a few times, disoriented. His mind was still foggy as he regained consciousness, but even in his haze he was quick to realize that he was uncomfortable.

It was hot.

His face was burning, skin covered in a thin layer of sweat. His hair, damp and disheveled, clung to the back of his neck, clammy hands grasping at his sheets. Matthew’s ears were filled with the sound of his own breathing, his breaths ragged and shallow, his heart racing. And then he froze, suddenly aware of his own body, and the warmth pooling deep within in his belly. And the buried fragments of his unconscious thoughts came to greet him in his wake.

“Matthew…”

Gasping again, he shot up, steadying his weight on his elbows. The voice, husky and low, echoed in his mind, and he brought a hand to the nape of his neck, remembering how his own name had felt whispered against it, how amazing it had sounded rolling off his accented tongue and into Matthew’s ears, how it left him trembling. It all came crashing back to him at once, and he shivered, a sharp tingle rushing straight down the length of his spine.

Slowly, he lowered himself back onto his mattress and groaned, pushing his sticky hair away from his forehead. Part of him was grateful for having woken up when he did; the last thing he wanted to do was spend yet another morning scrambling to change his bedsheets. But his relief was quickly replaced with annoyance, because not only was he groggy and sweaty, he was horny too.

He pressed his face into his pillow and squeezed his eyes shut, willing himself to go back to sleep, to just slip away and forget about the blood rushing between his legs and the thumping in his chest and the boy who was the source of it all. But as Matthew lie there in the still quiet of his room, his mind began to wander, a name slithering its way into every corner and crevice of his brain.

Gilbert Beilschmidt.

His hands twitched beneath the sheets, his legs fidgeting to accommodate the swelling between his thighs. Matthew gnawed at his bottom lip, hating himself for where his mind was going, for wondering what Gilbert’s hands might feel like at his waist and along his back, dragging across his body, fingertips caressing his skin just as softly as they had his hair. He wanted to trace the veins along his arms, to run his fingers along the taut muscles beneath. He wanted to feel Gilbert looming over him, wanted to feel Gilbert’s breath along his ear, the vibrations of his voice. He hated himself for it and yet, he loved the feeling of his eyelids growing heavy and his breaths becoming short once more, his fingers slipping beneath his waistband.

Matthew was still wearing Gilbert's shirt. He had taken it and Gilbert's pants off as soon as he retreated to his room that evening, thinking that the sooner he did so, the sooner Alfred would shut up about it. The clothes sat draped over his desk chair as he lost himself in one of his books, as he went downstairs for dinner, as he stepped into the bathroom for his shower. And as he got ready for bed, Matthew had fully intended to toss Gilbert's clothes in with the rest of his laundry. His pants made it. His shirt did not. Before Matthew knew it, he was bringing the shirt to his nose, slipping it over his head.

He knew how fucked up it was, how fucked up *he* was, to be getting himself off in his best friend's clothing. And yet it seemed that his guilt, his knowing how wrong it was, made it feel all the more amazing. And he berated himself amidst his pleasure, assaulting his lip with his teeth while his hand gripped himself below, pulling at his hair as he shuddered with desire. How disgusting he was, selfishly indulging in his own fantasies, thinking of things that he knew friends should never think about friends. He knew it was wrong. But with each sharp intake of breath came Gilbert's scent, lingering on the fabric of the shirt that wasn't his, and Matthew's thoughts were bombarded with everything *him*, from the very moment Gilbert had claimed his desk all those months ago, to the words he had uttered just hours before, his voice strangely soft against the crackling of wood.

"You're fucking adorable, Matthew."

And Matthew moaned, shoving his face against his pillow to muffle the embarrassing sound. It wasn't the first time he'd thought of such things, of Gilbert, like this. Nor was it the first time he'd touched himself. But it was the first time he'd touched himself to thoughts of Gilbert, to thoughts of anyone, and it was like nothing he'd ever felt before. It was the first time he'd felt genuine emotion behind his efforts, more than just the sensation of skin against skin and a quick release. He hadn't known that someone could make him feel this way, that someone could make him *want* so badly. It was Gilbert who was making his limbs quiver, his hips jerk. It was Gilbert Beilschmidt who had him wiping his brow, beaded with sweat, and dragging his tongue along his lips.

Matthew could feel himself getting closer, and he reached out toward his nightstand for the box of Kleenex, knocking over his alarm clock in his haste. He barely heard the noise it made as it hit the floor, his ears filled once again with the sounds of his heavy panting. With tissues at the ready, he leaned back against his headboard and shoved his boxers down and off his hips, sighing as finally allowed himself full freedom. The bottom of Gilbert's shirt was clenched tightly in his other fist, just above his navel, and he imagined that it was not him, but Gilbert holding it there, eager to see what he was doing. And...now Gilbert was pushing the hem up, bit by bit, little by little, to watch his stomach rise and fall with quick, short breaths. Matthew shuddered at the feeling of the fabric riding up his skin, feeling himself squirm and buck until finally, it hit him, hard. He groaned as his body convulsed, gasping to the ceiling.

And it was at that very moment that Matthew stopped lying to himself, that he stopped trying to bury the feelings swelling inside him, denying their existence, hoping that they would disappear. Because no one had ever made him feel the way Gilbert did. No one had ever made him feel so conflicted, so anxious, and yet giddy all the same. Never before had his

chest ached the way it did as he lie there in his room, his head slumped back in the warmth of his afterglow. And Matthew knew he'd be a fool to ignore it.

“Do you think Matthew fancies him?” Arthur asked his husband from their bathroom, cursing as yet another hair was plucked from his brow. “Christ! Can you not be more gentle?” he grumbled, rubbing at the skin between his eyebrows. Francis clicked his tongue, a hand falling to his hip as he sighed at how hopelessly fragile his Englishman was.

“That one hurt because you moved,” he chided. “Now, hold still. I’m almost finished.”

“I was doing perfectly fine without your little pink torture device in my face,” Arthur huffed. “It was just a few hairs, nothing more.”

“It was a unibrow, Arthur.”

“Oh, it was not!”

“*Non*…” Francis smiled sweetly. “But it was getting there.”

Arthur scoffed. “So, you’re admitting that it wasn’t.”

“Oh, stop your whining. You’ll thank me when I’m done.” Arthur pouted and steadied himself on the edge of their bathtub, eyes closing as he allowed himself to relax.

It was late, nearly ten o'clock, and had Francis not trapped him in the bathroom to fuss over something as asinine as a few stray hairs, Arthur would have already been in bed. The frog was lucky they had nowhere to be in the morning. Hopefully they could finish decorating the tree tomorrow. He suppressed a yawn, leaning into the warm hand cupping the side of his face.

“So will you answer my question, git?”

“Hm, what was that?”

“Do you think Matthew fancies the boy?” he repeated. “Gilbert.” Arthur heard, and felt, Francis laugh, nothing more than a soft huff of air against his cheek. He cracked open an eye to see a small smile. It wasn’t one of those cheeky smiles he had been expecting, but a genuine smile, his gaze soft and somewhat distant, as if recalling a memory. He then looked directly at Arthur.

“Why? Do you?”

Arthur frowned at such a stupid question, but quickly relaxed his face as those dreaded tweezers came towards his brow. “Obviously,” he snapped, “else I wouldn’t be asking you.”

Francis gave an amused hum. “After tonight, we’d be in denial to think otherwise.”

Arthur cracked a smile, remembering how helpless Matthew had looked during dinner earlier that night, fidgeting in his seat once the conversation had landed on said boy. Matthew had

nearly rivaled his brother with the way that he was stuffing his mouth with food, most likely, Arthur figured, to avoid answering his questions.

“I don’t think I’ve ever seen Matt eat so quickly.”

“Maybe we shouldn’t have teased him so much,” Francis said, but the smirk on his face told otherwise.

“We?” Arthur scoffed. “You mean *you*?”

“He was fine until you suggested he invite the young man to dinner.”

Arthur folded his arms defensively at his chest. “And why wouldn’t I? I’d much like to meet the lad who has my son resembling a beet each time we mention his name. Wouldn’t you?”

“Of course. If I hadn’t already met him.”

“...What?” Arthur’s eyes shot open as Francis’ hand left his cheek, blue eyes scanning Arthur’s face to admire his finished work. He grabbed the mirror sitting on the sink nearby and held it in front of the Englishman.

“Better, *oui*?”

“Yes, yes, it’s bloody brilliant, Francis. Now, what did you say? You’ve already *met* him?”

“You didn’t even look,” he said with a pout.

“Francis!” Francis couldn’t help laughing at how desperate Arthur sounded. Maybe he shouldn’t have waited so long to tell him.

“Yes, we met, but—”

“What? And you didn’t tell me?”

Francis shrugged slightly. ”We didn’t talk for very long.”

“But you *talked*! You *met*!” For Francis to so casually announce his meeting with the mysterious boy was mind-boggling to Arthur.

Gilbert—it was a name that the couple had become intensely familiar with during the past few months. He was a friend of Matthew’s, they knew that much. But the more Arthur and Francis heard his name, the more they realized that they didn’t know much else. They’d heard the boy’s name so many times, but had yet to see his face, or hear his voice. Who *was* Gilbert? The two had been dying to know. To know how the boy carried himself, to get a feel for his personality. Francis finally had insider information, and Arthur wanted in on it too. Not even a middle aged bloke like him could resist a bit of frivolous gossip. Especially when it involved his son’s crush.

“Where did you meet?” he pressed. “When? What did you talk about? What was he like?” Arthur paused momentarily to regain control of his racing thoughts. And then his face fell.

“Why wasn’t I invited?” Was Matthew afraid he would embarrass him?

“Skype, Arthur,” Francis laughed. “That’s why you weren’t invited.” Arthur gave him a look that prompted Francis to explain. “It was by chance, honestly,” he said, eyes softening as he recalled the circumstances. “I went into Matthieu’s room for his laundry a few days ago. He was on his computer. I didn’t think anything of it until he started talking to it,” he chuckled.

“Oh, that was my Papa,” Matthew had said, prompting Francis to peek over as he left his son’s closet with a basket at his hip. There was a boy on his screen.

“*Et qui est-ce?” Francis asked with a smirk, though he already had a pretty good idea of who he was looking at. The boy's stark blonde hair and red eyes were unforgettable to say the least, even still with the grainy footage of his low quality webcam.*

“*A-Ah, c'est mon ami Gilbert*.” Matthew blushed at the sound of Gilbert’s laughter in his ears, the boy saying something or the other about how “pretty” his name sounded in French. Matthew tuned him out as he continued. “*Nous faisons nos devoirs.*”

“*Devoirs, hein?*”

Matthew turned suddenly as he felt the bed dip next to him. “P-Papa?”

“It would be rude of me to leave so suddenly with a friend in the room, *non*?” Before Matthew could even sputter out an answer, one of his earbuds was plucked from his ear. “Hello, Gilbert. I am Matthieu’s papa,” Francis said warmly. He wanted to laugh at the way the boy seemed to stiffen when their eyes met. “I’ve been hearing a lot about you.”

“Oh, h-hello. It’s, uh, nice to meet you, sir.” It was strange for Matthew to hear him speak so formally, and he would’ve laughed if he wasn’t so terrified of what his father would say next.

“Oh, the pleasure is all mine. You’re something of a celebrity around here, you know.” Francis might have been exaggerating just a tad, but he simply couldn’t pass up an opportunity like this. The seed had already been planted a while ago; he was just watering it a bit.

“Papa!” Matthew whined under his breath. His grip tightened around the small paperback book he held, absolutely mortified. Awkward. This was going to be awkward. Matthew waited for the long, uncomfortable silence that he was sure would follow, but it never came.

“Celebrity, huh?” Gilbert laughed sheepishly, in a way so different from the boisterous cackles Matthew was used to. To hear such an unusually modest sound coming from him was actually really...cute. *Merde*, he cursed in his head, could he *not* blush when his meddling father was right next to him? “Geez, Mattie, what’ve you been saying about me?”

“N-Nothing.” He could not sit through another second more of this. If he had just taken his laundry downstairs the night before, this all could have been avoided. “*Alleeez, Papa,*” Matthew pleaded. Francis bit back laughter as Matthew gave him a light, off-camera shove. “We need to finish our homework.”

“But we’ve only just met! We would love to have you over sometime, Gilbert,” he said in spite of the hand shoving at his waist. “From what we’ve been hearing, you sound like a very charming young man.”

This was as far as Francis got before Matthew kicked him out of the room.

“You twit.” Arthur laughed as he said it. “Matthew will never want to bring him over now.”

Francis shrugged innocently. “Then we’ll just have to wait until they start dating.”

Dating. Arthur cringed inwardly at the word as Francis spoke it aloud. “*If* they start...”

His voice trailed off, unable to bring himself to say it. He was only just beginning to realize how truly unprepared he was for what might be coming next, reminded of the fact that his wee little Matthew wasn’t so little anymore. Arthur had watched his son change over the past few months, holding his head a little higher, laughing a little louder, smiling brightly, freely. Now most mornings it was Matthew who was dragging Alfred out the door before school, not the other way around. There was no denying that Matthew was happier. And there was no denying that Gilbert was the reason why. And Arthur wondered if it would really be so bad if his son’s firsts were shared with someone who brought him so much joy. He looked up when he heard his husband laugh again, the sound just as soft as before.

“I’ve seen that look before.”

“I’ve no idea what you’re talking about,” Arthur mumbled as he stood, peeking in the mirror to scrutinize Francis’ work. It looked cleaner, he supposed. Not that he was going to say that aloud.

Francis smirked and leaned against the door frame, locking eyes with Arthur’s reflection. “Arthur,” he crooned, “you know I know you better than that.”

Arthur flushed, suddenly more interested in the hand soap than the sight of the other’s smug face. “I was reminiscing a bit, what of it? I’m an old man, frog.” He turned to face the man behind him, whose expression had softened. “Don’t you remember the day he woke up, Francis?” Arthur’s voice was just above a whisper.

The smile on the Frenchman’s face fell. “Of course I do.”

He would never forget it. The way Matthew cried for them. The way he grabbed at the gauze over his eyelids. How fragile his tiny hands felt as Francis took them in his own. He remembered how they trembled, how he squeezed them tightly, how he brought them to his lips and kissed them, speaking softly so that his son would hear him and feel him and know that Papa was there. He remembered the way Arthur stroked Matthew’s hair, kissed his forehead, how his voice began to waver and his eyes began to well, wiping tears from Matthew’s cheeks while he ignored his own.

“I remember how guilty I felt. As I lie with him in that bed and held him,” Arthur said. He could still remember how that little hand grasped at the fabric of his shirt, holding on as if he

would disappear at any moment. “I knew we’d made the right choice, but I felt so guilty. And I was scared. Because I didn’t know if we would be able to give him the life he deserved.”

“Arthur…”

Francis frowned, his chest tightening when Arthur echoed himself from all those years before, as Francis held him in his arms, neither of them able to sleep. Matthew would have to learn how to walk again, Arthur kept saying, how to read. They would have to learn along with him. How would he adapt? How would he fair in school? How would people treat him? Would he make friends? What if they couldn’t give him what he needed? Would he feel alone? All his fears for Matthew came rushing out and Francis listened while they lie there in darkness, their son’s cries still fresh in each other’s minds.

Arthur and Francis never wanted Matthew to think he was less than. That he didn’t deserve the things and experiences his peers had because he was disabled, or because of how people around him may treat him. And although they told him this repeatedly, they could tell that as he approached adolescence he began to struggle. They knew he was having trouble with school, with people. The last thing they had wanted was for their son to feel alienated, but it seemed as if school was making him feel just that. His middle school years had been the worst, and despite high school being significantly better, the two parents still found themselves concerned. This year, though, had been completely different.

Arthur laughed suddenly. “But now I’m standing here worrying myself about a boy Matthew likes, and realizing that this is all I’ve ever wanted for him. To see him smiling and happy, having his little crushes and spending time with friends.”

Francis smiled. “It’s a beautiful sight, isn’t it?”

Arthur nodded, wearing a smile that mirrored his husband's. “Truly.”

“I like Gilbert.”

It had come out just like that. And although his heart was still thrashing around in his chest, Matthew couldn’t believe how much lighter he felt. He couldn’t believe how *good* it had felt, to finally say the words aloud. And he felt like he could laugh and scream and cry all at the same time, because it had really been just that simple.

“Holy shit,” came Alfred’s response.

Matthew shifted in his seat, a sinking feeling in his stomach. Was Alfred angry? And then a pillow collided with his face, followed by an expert noogie only a big brother could give. Matthew whined, attempting but failing to escape Alfred’s grip. “Al! What are you doing?! That hurts!”

“Took you long enough, bro!” he laughed, letting Matthew free. “Am I dreaming or what?”

“...What?”

“I’ve been waiting for you to say that since October, dude!”

Matthew froze. “You...you knew?”

“Hell yeah I knew!” Alfred cried. He watched as Matthew’s face turned progressively red and laughed. “God, seriously, what took you so long?”

“I don’t know! I just...we’re just friends and I thought I would just...keep it to myself.”

Alfred frowned. “Mattie, how is he supposed to know you like him if you keep it to yourself?”

Matthew blinked. “That’s the point.”

“You’re not gonna tell him?” Alfred sounded appalled.

“No!”

“Dude, why not?”

“Because.”

“Because why?”

“Because I don’t know if he likes me back, Al!”

Alfred narrowed his eyes in disbelief, and just as he made to respond Matthew spoke again.

“We’re friends, Al. Gilbert...he’s the first real friend I’ve ever had,” he said softly. “And because of him I’ve made even more. I don’t want to mess it all up because of my feelings.”

“Matthew, I’ve seen the way he looks at you.”

“W-What?”

“You guys are ridiculous,” Alfred sighed, snagging his phone from his pocket and scrolling through his contacts for his desired recipient. Vanya. He smirked as he quickly sent out his message; they had to move this thing along. And fast. “Mattie,” he chuckled, “the reason I was so hard on him at first is *because* I knew that he liked you.”

Matthew gulped, hearing what his brother was saying, but having a difficult time processing it. Gilbert? Like him? He shook his head. “If you knew that he...then why didn’t you say anything?”

“I wanted to hear it from you first. I knew that if you really didn’t want anything with him, you wouldn’t have told me. But you did.” Alfred grinned. “So, what does that mean?”

Matthew groaned and held his hands over his face, his voice muffled. “What do I do?”

Alfred could have been a double for the Cheshire Cat. “I’ve got you covered, bro.” Within seconds he was sending Ivan a time and a place.

Where better to interrogate his brother’s suitor than at Mickey D’s? Alfred hoped Gilbert thought tomorrow would be as "awesome" as he did.

It's Really, Really That

Chapter Notes

Chapter 9 is here!

Yes, I know, it's *finally* here!

I won't bore you with where I've been or what I've been doing, but I did just want to thank everyone who has subscribed, bookmarked, commented, and given kudos to this story. It really means a lot to me, and makes me happy to know that so many people are enjoying what I write. I honestly didn't think that this story would gain as much traction as it has, and for that I am extremely grateful.

We're beginning to reach the first climax. No skipping around in this chapter; it's all chronological. I hope you enjoy it!

⠠⠴⠂ ⠴⠂ ⠲⠴⠄ ⠇⠇⠆ ⠲⠴⠄ ⠇⠇⠆ ⠠⠶⠄ ⠠⠂

"Because you like my brother."

The words had been so sudden. So matter-of-fact that Gilbert nearly dropped the ice cream he held in his hand. Or...maybe it hadn't been so sudden. Gilbert had asked why he was there after all—and that had been Alfred's answer, albeit unexpected. All at once, Gilbert felt his breath leave him, his heart leaping into his throat. Alfred's lips had stopped moving, but it was as if his eyes were saying everything his voice wasn't.

Gilbert was only mildly aware of the goosebumps appearing along his arms and the stiffness of the hairs at his neck, tensing as he realized the boy across from him was waiting for an answer. But for the first time in his life, Gilbert found himself genuinely struggling to form words, not because he didn't know what to say, but because he wasn't sure how they would sound once they escaped the safe, secluded corners of his mind. Once they became words and not merely thoughts.

"Or am I wrong?"

The question hung in the air, and Gilbert's heart thrashed hysterically in his chest as he came to terms with the fact that Alfred, Matthew's brother of all people, would be the first to hear what he'd dare say next.

Alfred watched as Gilbert ran a hand through his white-blonde hair, a deep red tinging the tips of his ears and cheeks with an intensity that rivaled that of his eyes. It was a strange thing to see him so hesitant, so visibly uncomfortable. *This guy*, Alfred thought to himself. Even with an ego the size of the sun, Gilbert Beilschmidt, whose very presence seemed to engulf

nearly everyone he met, had become an awkward teenage boy. It was the stuff of cheesy romance novels, and had Alfred not been so invested in Gilbert's next words, he surely would have laughed. A little longer and Alfred was sure Gilbert would blend right in with the booth he sat in.

"Honestly, Alfred..." Gilbert began, his voice so much softer than Alfred was anticipating, "I don't even know if 'like' cuts it anymore."

It was Alfred's turn to be shocked, eyes widening as the meaning of Gilbert's words sunk in. Gilbert exhaled in a short huff of relief, as if those words had been holding him hostage. With a restless hand still in his hair, he winced, mumbling to himself in words Alfred couldn't understand.

"L-Look, I know I'm a fucking wreck right now," Gilbert said, his accent thickening in his anxiousness, "but I'm not just talking out of my ass. I meant exactly what I said. I mean, Christ...all he has to do is smile at me and it's like I forget how to fucking breathe." He sighed softly, rubbing at his neck . "I like Matthew. A lot. And lately, I..." he trailed off, trying his damnedest to ignore the way his cheeks began to sting. "I feel like it might be...just a little more than that."

He wouldn't dare say it aloud. Not while he was still so unsure. Not while he was still trying to accept how foreign his own heart felt within his chest, how it could feel so weightless and yet be slamming into his ribcage like fists against a locked door, like it was screaming at Gilbert for the missing key.

If it wasn't *that* then, god, what else could it be?

What else could be making his head feel so light, his breaths shallow? There couldn't possibly be anything else that could explain why his heart was racing like this, why his entire being ached with this perpetual yearning that he could no longer resist. Gilbert *adored* Matthew. He adored everything *about* Matthew. His smile, his laugh, the faces he would make when Gilbert told his stupid jokes. He lived for the way Matthew pursed his lips when he was deep in thought, the way he pouted when Gilbert teased him, how he'd hide behind his hands when he was embarrassed, or flash the smuggest of smiles when he'd won one of their silly little arguments. It was almost too much for him to watch the way Matthew's face would light up when Gilbert asked him about a book he was reading, how the pitch of his voice would rise in his excitement. Even the way his hair would frizz up on rainy days, or how the frigid winter air would tinge his nose and cheeks pink—Gilbert just couldn't stand it.

He couldn't stand the feeling of his chest tightening when Matthew giggled his name, of his breath catching when Matthew took hold of him. He'd felt his mind go numb the very first time they'd hugged, relishing in the warmth of Matthew's body against his own, the scent of his hair, the feeling of Matthew in his arms. And it took everything within Gilbert not to pull him right back. This is what he was feeling. And he was afraid that he would never find the right words to express it.

Alfred furrowed his brow, staring at the boy in front of him in a sort of stupefied awe. He had known for months that Gilbert liked his brother, but *this*, what Gilbert was hinting at, was beyond anything Alfred had anticipated. "You're...you're serious."

Gilbert looked up at him, chuckling. "Well, I'm not making myself look like an idiot on purpose. Yeah," he said with a nod. "I'm serious. Your brother's cute as hell."

"Tell me somethin' I don't know," Alfred laughed, his smile fading. "I can't even remember the last time I heard someone say that." His voice was low as he thought aloud, his gaze leaving Gilbert for the window. "Someone that isn't Dad or Pops." He couldn't help laughing again. "God, Gilbert, the more I try to find something I don't like about you, the more I come up empty-handed."

Gilbert laughed nervously, not knowing whether to be offended or relieved.

Alfred's eyes settled back on Gilbert. "Really, Gilbert. Ever since I met you I've been waiting for you to fuck up," he said with a sudden frankness that made the other tense. "Because that's what Mattie's 'friends' have always done. They play with his emotions. Make 'im feel welcome 'til they get bored of playing good samaritan and disappear. And I was waiting for you to do the same."

Visibly appalled, Gilbert was quick to respond. "What? Why would you think I'd do something like that to him? I'd never—"

"I know, Gil. I know," he conceded. Alfred stared at his accidental friend, at the way his chest protruded, at the way those fiercely red eyes stared back at him with a potency that left no room for doubt. His tone was fond as he spoke again."You sure as hell proved me wrong."

Gilbert's shoulders went slack as Alfred gave a soft chuckle, and only then did he realize how suddenly he'd lunged forward in his own defense. He slowly sat back in his seat, clearing his throat. "So," he said, the break in conversation short-lived, "was that your first impression of me then? Some kinda jackass looking for community service?"

Alfred sighed, his eyes apologetic. "It wasn't you, it was me. I was just looking for something that wasn't there, and I know it was wrong of me to judge you like that, but it's...it's just something that I'm trying to work on," he admitted. "I can't help but be cautious of the people Mattie hangs out with. Because I've seen how people have treated him, and I'll be damned if I see it happen again." Alfred paused, clenching his jaw. His mind was teeming with such vengeful thoughts, thoughts that he knew would be better kept to himself. Nonetheless, it didn't stop him from venting, years of pent up frustration finally boiling over.

"Before he was the 'blind kid,'" Alfred scowled as the words left his mouth, "he was just Mattie, my cute kid brother. And even after he lost his eyes, he was still my cute kid brother, who just happened to be blind." A bitter smile stretched across his face. "But to everyone else he's just this no-name handicapped kid. And they refuse to believe that he's a real person with feelings. Either they tiptoe around him like he's fucking contagious, or talk to him like he's three. You know what that *does* to a person?" Alfred sighed inaudibly, attempting to calm himself as he stared into the pit of his empty cup. The question had been a rhetorical one, but after a short silence Gilbert responded, Alfred looking up as he did so.

"Yeah," he replied. "I'm a walking mutation."

Gilbert wore a small smirk, but the air of indignation that seemed to consume the other boy wasn't lost on Alfred. "When I first moved here from Germany, I was this seven year old foreign kid with a funny accent and my English was shit. Which was fine 'cause see, I wasn't the only foreign kid in school with shitty English," he said with a slight shrug of his shoulders. "But take a funny speakin' foreign kid with terrible English and make him an albino." He laughed bitterly. "Forget everyone else—not even the other ESL kids wanted to be around me. Thought they'd all turn into a 'demon' like me if they got too close."

Gilbert smiled wryly, his expression a conflicting mixture of amusement and contempt. "This kid in my fifth grade math class spread a rumor that I was a cannibal." He laughed again, only because the action seemed to distract him from how heavy his chest had become. As prideful as Gilbert was of everything that made him who he was, including his albinism, it hadn't always been so. And as memories of his childhood years spent longing for others' approval began to resurface, he found himself disgusted, spiteful. But he still couldn't keep that cynical smile at bay. "Can you fucking believe that?"

The look on Alfred's face told Gilbert that, no, he couldn't. And now that Gilbert was saying it aloud, he couldn't either.

"I'd never say that I know what it feels like to be in Matthew's shoes. But I know what it feels like to have people treat you like you aren't just as human as they are. Like you can't feel like they feel. It...it fucks you up." Gilbert looked as if he wanted to say something more, so Alfred kept quiet, all the while astonished at hearing Gilbert speak so candidly. "A few weeks ago, Matthew was telling me about this book he'd been looking for. Said he thought it might be at the public library, but wasn't sure how to get there. Lutz practically lives in there during exams, so I knew where it was. Of course I was gonna take him there, I didn't even think twice about it."

"I remember that..." Alfred found himself smiling. "That day he came home a little late with a shit ton of books." Alfred could still remember the way Matthew stumbled inside looking absolutely smitten, a few short honks echoing at his back as he closed the door behind him. And all Alfred could begrudgingly think was: *Beilschmidt, you smooth motherfucker*.

"Yeah. I knew he wasn't gonna leave with just one, the nerd," he laughed, smile fleeting. "When we were pulling into the lot, he comes outta nowhere saying he's sorry. Told me he was trying to get used to using the buses to get around the city, so people wouldn't need to drive him places. Said he would pay for gas and that he wouldn't take long...even told me I didn't have to go inside with him." Gilbert could feel that heaviness in his chest returning, and god, what he wouldn't give to have Matthew's airy laughter take it away. He swallowed thickly, continuing. "Then he jokes and says I must be sick of dragging him around everywhere." The way Alfred's face fell made Gilbert look away, because those knowing eyes confirmed for him that Matthew's words weren't the first of its kind.

When Gilbert first met Matthew, the then timid boy apologized for everything. Gilbert would forget his novel and *Matthew* would apologize for his book being in braille. Or Gilbert would make the two late for class and *Matthew* would apologize for being "too slow." Nothing was his fault, everything was Matthew's. The look of guilt Matthew would get on his face was unbearable, and Gilbert couldn't tell him to cut it out fast enough.

The change wasn't immediate, but soon Gilbert found Matthew scolding him where necessary, hounding him to do his homework and shushing him in the middle of class. And Gilbert loved it. He loved to see Matthew's personality begin to shine, to watch him grow more comfortable, more bold in his company. Matthew couldn't possibly know how quickly he'd charmed his way into Gilbert's heart, and Gilbert was reminded everyday of how shamelessly hard he'd fallen. But hearing Matthew's words in the car that Friday afternoon stopped him cold.

Gilbert took a deep breath, aware of how quickly his heart was beating. "Hearing him say stuff like that...I hate it. I hate that he still feels like he's some kinda burden on me. Because it's not true. And I know he thinks that because that's how all these other people look at him, avoiding him the way they do, like they don't wanna deal with him. I see it too, Alfred. I see what they do to him." Gilbert suddenly abandoned English for a second time, but Alfred didn't need to know German to understand the exasperation laced throughout his features.

"They might be fine with treating Mattie like he doesn't exist, but I'd be in the ground before I *ever* make him feel like he isn't the best damn thing on the planet."

Alfred felt the tension in his body vanish as Gilbert spoke. It was the first time he'd heard anyone so precisely describe the storm of emotions that tore through him each time he was reminded of how his brother was viewed by the rest of the world. Anger. Resentment. Disgust. He had long been convinced that no one else would ever be able to understand why Alfred was as protective over Matthew as he was, not even Matthew himself.

But Gilbert continued to prove him wrong.

"Mattie's *never* been a burden on me. I never do anything I do with him because I have to...I do it because I *want* to," Gilbert said, looking Alfred straight in the eye despite how vulnerable he was feeling. He remembered how stunned Matthew had looked sitting in the passenger seat, his hand frozen on the door as he listened to Gilbert say these exact words. The tender smile he was graced with stole the air straight from his lungs, and it was all Gilbert could do not to lean over and just...

"There you go." Alfred flashed an earnest smile. "Bein' all likable again, dammit." The more and more Gilbert spoke, the more Alfred was convinced that Gilbert's "just a little more than that" was exactly *that*.

Gilbert gave a light shrug, smirking. "C'mon, Al, look at who you're talking to," he teased, Alfred laughing at how his self-proclaimed Awesomeness appeared to be making a comeback. Although Alfred was more than impressed with Gilbert's sincerity, he'd almost begun to wonder if the other had been replaced by a clone. Apparently Gilbert could get serious when he wanted to. Not unlike Alfred himself.

"I was *this* close to quitting the team, y'know." Alfred illustrated just how close "this" was with his fingers.

"What?" Red eyes narrowed in disbelief. "Wrestling?" Alfred was captain for Christ's sake, a bonafide jock.

Alfred nodded. “Just so I could spend more time with Mattie. Because I knew how miserable he was, even though he tried so hard to hide it from me. He thinks I don't notice, but I do. I know him better than anyone. I mean...that's my job. To make sure he's ok." He suddenly went silent, pushing back old memories of just how fragile Matthew used to be. "So, I was gonna quit. Ivan would take my place as captain. I had it all figured out. But then, the day before I planned to talk with Coach, Mattie spent the whole walk home talking about *you*.”

Gilbert couldn’t help the way his body tensed as Alfred locked eyes with him again. “Me?”

Alfred broke into a smile, chuckling at the way the other's face flared right back up. “Yeah, you. Gilbert this and Gilbert that, somethin’ about a club you invited him to.”

“O-Oh. Yeah.” Gilbert cringed inwardly at how stupid that whole stunt was in hindsight. It seemed like ages ago now that he thought about it, and he smiled as he remembered the first time he and Matthew spoke.

“I don’t remember much of what he was saying, but I’ll never forget how happy he was. God...he was so happy. He just wouldn’t stop smiling. I mean, even yesterday, he went on and on about these potato pancake thingies he ate at your place last week.”

“*Kartoffelpuffer*,” Gilbert said softly, flush deepening as he remembered how poorly and yet adorably Matthew had pronounced it.

“Yeah, the cart-awful thingies, that’s it." Gilbert cringed again.

Just as poor.

Nowhere near adorable.

"Look,” Alfred said, leaning forward on the table, “he likes you, dude. I hear him talk about you enough to know.” And it was in that moment of Alfred’s casual admission that Gilbert felt as if his heart had exploded in his chest.

"He—" Gilbert stumbled out of the booth to follow after Alfred, who had started heading for the exit. "You said he—"

"Likes you, yep. You think I'd waste time calling you out here if he didn't?" Alfred grinned, clapping Gilbert on the shoulder. "What you do with that information is all up to you, but I'll tell you this. I’ve seen the way you are with my brother, and I know I can trust you. Even the Vargas twins, Toni and your brother—it’s been forever since I’ve made friends with people who’re so comfortable around him. I'd be lying if I said that wasn't just as important to me." Alfred extended a hand, his next words just as much a warning as they were a blessing. "I’m trusting you to take care of him, Gilbert."

Gilbert looked down at Alfred’s outstretched hand, gripping it tightly and giving it a firm shake. “You know I will. That's a promise.”

And it was right then and there that Gilbert knew. His words would mean nothing if they never reached Matthew's ears.

Of all the ways Matthew had expected to spend New Year's Eve, explaining to his brother why he had a secret stash of condoms certainly wasn't one of them. But there he was. Standing in the middle of his room, frozen under Alfred's gaze, a box of Trojans falling to the floor at his feet. Matthew had never in his life wanted to fade from existence more than he did in that very moment he heard Alfred swing open his door, his heart all but slamming to a halt. He'd intended to ask Matthew if he was ready, but just as soon as his mouth parted the words died on his lips. His eyes darted from his brother's blanched face to the condoms now littering his floor, and then once more to his brother, his mouth still agape. He looked down again just to make sure he wasn't hallucinating. And he wasn't.

"Well, shit."

And like fuel to a waning fire, Matthew's face reddened just as quickly as it had paled, the boy groaning as he slowly lowered himself to his knees. "Stop thinking what you're thinking. Papa left them in my nightstand," he mumbled, still irritated that his father insisted on leaving him these little "gifts." This was the *third* find this month! He scrambled to return the contents to their box, managing to shove the obnoxiously colored packets inside before Alfred plucked the box straight from his hands. He felt like dying.

"Oh my god," Alfred snickered as Matthew slowly rose from the floor. "Did you know these were flavored, Matt?"

"Oh yeah, sure, Al! Because I go around tasting condoms," Matthew retorted sarcastically, his usual defense mechanism against his brother's stupidity. Alfred snorted at the way Matthew crossed his arms at his chest, indignant.

"But Matt." Alfred peered inside the little box. Oh shit, was that one *Cola* flavored? "They're *open*."

"They are not!"

"The box, I mean."

"So?" Matthew flushed. "These aren't *real*, remember?" he added dryly, placing an index finger at the outer corner of each eye. "I couldn't even tell what they were until I opened the damn thing..."

"I'm just kiddin' with you, bro," he chuckled and clapped Matthew's back. He grinned nostalgically, plopping himself at the foot of Matthew's bed. "Pops gave me a box a while ago too."

Matthew seemed to relax a bit at hearing that, his arms falling to his sides. "He did?"

"Yup. Found 'em just sitting in the top of my closet. Mine weren't flavored though," he pouted.

"How many did Papa leave you?"

Alfred shrugged. "I dunno, it was a box of, like, ten."

Matthew licked his lips and adjusted the scarf at his neck, the room suddenly a bit too warm. "So he...left you just one box?"

"Yeah...?" He stared at the other, confused. "Why?" Matthew's face grew a shade deeper, but he said nothing, Alfred's eyes following him as he walked over to his dresser. Slowly, Matthew opened the very bottom drawer, pushing aside socks and shirts before pulling out a small Ziplock bag. Full of condoms.

Alfred's eyes widened when Matthew turned around. "Holy shit, you have more?"

"Just take them," Matthew groaned, tossing the bag in Alfred's direction. Alfred leaned over to accommodate Matthew's poor aim and caught it, gawking at how many were inside and wondering if his old man was in his right mind.

"There's like 20 in here, Matt! Why the hell did he give you so many?"

"I dunno, ask Papa!" he huffed. "I just kept finding them all over my room! Under my pillow, in my laundry basket—I just found this box today! I don't even know how long it's been sitting in here..."

Alfred's lips had begun to tremble with suppressed laughter as Matthew became more frantic, flailing his arms about. But the sudden realization that his father was basically the Condom Fairy was too much for him to take. Matthew jumped as his brother burst into fittingly obnoxious laughter. "Under your *pillow*?"

Matthew waved dismissively and hurried to his closet. "Just shut up and take them," he said, pulling out his heaviest coat.

"You sure you don't wanna keep a couple?" he teased.

"Are you suggesting I have sex with Gilbert?"

It was so blunt that Alfred literally flinched. "What! No!"

"You're right, Al." His eyes seemed to settle on Alfred from over his shoulder. "On second thought, I'll take those back."

Alfred glared and clutched the bag to his chest like the ring Gollum loved so dearly. "Nope, they're mine, too late."

Matthew smirked and slipped on his parka. "Thought so."

"Mattie, don't say stuff like that!" Alfred whined, not the least bit comforted by the way Matthew rolled his eyes.

Matthew shrugged, casually zipping up his coat. "You started it."

"Yeah, but shit, Matt, you waited *three* months just to tell me you liked the guy, and now you're using 'sex' and 'Gilbert' in the same sentence?" He brought a hand to claw dramatically at his chest. "Do you *want* me to have a heart attack?"

"Oh shut up," he huffed, beginning to regret he'd said anything at all. "You're just mad your stupid joke backfired on you."

"Whatever," Alfred said with a pout. "I'm gonna forget I ever heard you say that."

"Good," he said, smiling triumphantly, "then we're even."

Alfred stuck out a tongue that Matthew couldn't see, rising to his feet with his salacious new goodies. With a quick glance at his watch, he noted it was nearly half past seven. "The car should be warmed up by now, so I'll be waiting out front. I'll call Ivan and let him know we're on our way." He really hoped Kat would be the one to answer the door this time around. He didn't think he could survive another one of Natalya's death glares.

"Wait," Matthew called out as the other neared the door. He turned around, curious at the way Matthew hesitated, his mouth opening and then closing again. Matthew adjusted his scarf a second time, eyes falling to the floor. With a gentle sigh he pushed a few strands of hair behind his ear. "Do..." He faced Alfred. "Do I look alright?"

And Alfred could have died happily right then and there, the image of his blushing little brother forever seared into his brain. From crude sexual humor to the modesty of a nun in mere seconds—only Matthew could make it seem like the most normal thing on earth. He smiled at his brother with a tenderness that reached his eyes, his chest swelling with an emotion that he couldn't quite identify. Something happy. Something sad. Something...bittersweet. Because despite having long prepared himself for this, he was still coming to terms with the fact that, after tonight, he would no longer be the only one to look after his brother. And dammit if that wasn't frightening. And yet, the look in Gilbert's eyes, the firm grip of his hand, had been reassuring.

"Mattie," he chuckled softly, "did you forget you made Dad and Pops cry?"

Matthew gave a small, sheepish smile. He really hadn't expected his parents to react the way they did when he'd gone downstairs to see them off on their date for the evening, feeling strangely accomplished with having not put his bow tie on crooked. (Alfred had told him so). His parents' conversation had stopped abruptly as he entered the kitchen, his dress shoes clicking against the white tile floor. And just before he began to ask what was wrong, Arthur spoke.

He hadn't been prepared for the way Arthur's voice had sounded when it reached his ears, quivering as he spoke Matthew's name. He hadn't been prepared for the way Francis followed suit, for the way they gushed and prattled and told him that they loved him, that they were proud of him, that they wanted him to enjoy himself tonight. And he certainly hadn't anticipated how many photos his parents would take, nor how fun it would be, especially with Alfred beside him pulling his obnoxious poses.

"Are you nervous?"

"No," he hurriedly replied, licking his lips. "I just..."

Alfred's hand left the doorknob, recognizing that that was his cue, and he sat himself at Matthew's computer desk. "That wasn't all that convincing," he said, a knowing smile on his face. "You wanna try again?"

Matthew sighed defeatedly, plopping himself at the foot of his bed. "Yeah...I am."

"He's still gonna be the same Gilbert, Matt," he said, voice soft, encouraging. "The same dorky guy you've been hanging out with since the first week of school. You liking him isn't gonna change that. What's there to be nervous about?"

"But, Al, it's not just me liking him that makes me nervous. It's him liking me *back*." He went to push a tendril of hair behind his ear in his nervousness, feeling silly when he realized it was already in place. "I didn't even know he liked me until three days ago," he said, face tingling as he said it aloud.

Gilbert...*liked* him. Gilbert liked *him*. The thought had butterflies flooding his stomach.

"All this time I've been telling myself that I'm happy just being his friend, a-and I am, I really am. But now that I know I'm not the only one with...these feelings, I..." He hesitated, finding it difficult to put all of the emotions he'd experienced in the past 72 hours into words. "I don't want to keep them a secret anymore. I want him to know too."

Alfred smiled, using the following silence as an opportunity to be more direct. "You wanna tell him."

Matthew nodded. "I really, *really* like him, Al," he said in a near whisper.

And Alfred was taken aback. Not because of what his brother had said, but because of *how* he'd said it. Because Matthew's "really really" was sounding exactly like Gilbert's "a little more than that."

"But I don't know how I should—o-or when I should—" He sighed again. "I'm just not even sure how I should act."

Before, when Matthew had just accepted that he had a crush on his best friend, and that Gilbert would never see him as anything more than that, it was easier. But now, he was convinced that he wouldn't even be able to think straight when he met with Gilbert again that night. Because all he would be able to think about was the fact that within the sensation of his every touch, or woven into the sounds of his mischievous laughter, were the same feelings that Matthew had intended to keep hidden for the rest of his natural born life. And it was exciting.

And it was scary.

"Matthew, you don't have to do anything special. Just be you, dude," he said, giving Matthew a little nudge to his shoulder. "He didn't start liking you because you put on some act, y'know. As for telling him how you feel, don't feel like you have to rush into it. It'll come naturally. Trust me."

Matthew hummed thoughtfully and leaned back on his bed, tilting his head back to face the ceiling. "Is that how it was for you and Ivan?" he asked, referring to he and the Russian becoming an official item two months back. He still smiled when he thought of the day Alfred had come into his room and planted himself face-first into Matthew's bed, groaning about how that "sexy Russian bastard" was now his "sexy Russian boyfriend." Much to Matthew's delight, of course; they'd been acting like an old married couple since the day they'd met.

Alfred blushed, rubbing at his neck. Welp. It *was* a solid question. "Well, yeah. I mean, even though we were both just in it for the sex at first, we...well, we realized we wanted more than that. It's not something that we planned, y'know, it just...happened. And when it's about to happen, you just..."

It was the feel of Ivan's broad chest rising and falling as he slept. The sound of his breathing. The scent of his skin. The way he had looked at Alfred when he woke that morning, how those deep pools of blue had made him feel like he was the most precious thing on earth. How he had pulled Alfred into his arms and made him wish he could spend the rest of his life between those sheets. That was when it happened.

"You just know." Alfred's flush deepened as he listened to himself speak. Wow, he was really shit at this, wasn't he? "What I'm trying to say is, based on experience, you don't make it happen. It happens to you. Don't stress yourself out over this, alright?" he said, relieved when he was rewarded with not only a smile, but a laugh too.

"I didn't take you for the poetic type." Matthew straightened himself, his smile widening. "But you're right. I'm overthinking it."

Alfred nodded. "It's New Year's Eve, Mattie. The only thing you should be worried about is having fun tonight."

Matthew nodded and stood from his bed with a renewed confidence, slipping a hand into his pocket and bringing out a small envelope. "Call me Avy."

Alfred grinned, hopping to his feet. "Now that's what I like to—oof!" He was stunned silent as Matthew hugged him. And dammit if his heart didn't feel like it was becoming too big for his chest.

"Thanks, Al."

"Yeah," he said as he brought his arms around his brother, the word wavering slightly as it left his tightened throat. "Anytime, bro."

Fonder

Chapter Notes

> I hope the length of this update doesn't bother anyone too much; compared to the others, this one is pretty meaty. I guess whether that's good or bad depends on what kind of reader you are, but nevertheless, I hope you'll enjoy.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

.⁘:⁘⁘⁖

"You ready to see a murder tonight, Ludchen?"

Ludwig grimaced at the feel of his brother's breath so close to his ear, Gilbert effectively bursting the bubble that was his personal space. He rolled his eyes as his hands glided across the steering wheel, letting off the gas as they passed through a residential area. "As long as I'm not the one doing it," he answered.

"Nah," Gilbert snickered, settling back in his seat. "You're a hitman, Lutz. That's too cliche."

Feliciano giggled from the passenger seat, chest bubbling with excitement. "But we don't know who Luddy works for. Maybe he *is* the killer technically, but one of us hired him to do it. That would make one of us the *real* killer, wouldn't it?"

Gilbert hummed thoughtfully, smirking with amusement. "Damn, I'd never even thought of that. Good shit."

"And what about you, *Bruder*?" Ludwig said, glancing up at his brother's reflection through the rear view mirror. Even he couldn't stop the small smile that came to his face, the uncertain course of that night's events becoming more intriguing than he'd care to admit. "Do you believe you are completely innocent?"

Gilbert laughed, waving a dismissive hand. "I'm a kickass lawyer; I solve murders, not commit them."

"While that may be true, you are a defense attorney."

"A *world renowned* defense attorney," he corrected. "And I haven't lost a case once in my entire career." He flashed a smug grin.

"And who's to say those cases were fairly won?"

"What?"

"Defense attorneys aren't exactly the most honest players in the courtroom." Ludwig locked eyes again with Gilbert's reflection, and the smile on the other's face dropped. "In fact, some in the profession have been known to go to any extremes necessary to ensure the acquittal of their clients. Are we supposed to believe that a prestigious lawyer with a record to maintain wouldn't do the same?"

"Oooh, a corrupt lawyer!" Feliciano clapped his hands together in delight. "Maybe the victim is a threat to one of Gil's cases, so he kills them to keep the truth from getting out."

"It's plausible." In the corner of his vision, Ludwig could see the way Feliciano perked up at his accord, and he smiled, amused by his growing obsession with the unknown culprit. He briefly wondered if he should remind Feliciano that this was merely play, but decided against it because, well, his energy was oddly adorable. But then again, when was Feliciano not?

A crooked smirk worked its way across Gilbert's face, and he threw an arm around the back of Ludwig's headrest. Fictitious as it all was, Gilbert still had a reputation to protect. "You sure about that?" he asked, eyes playful. "Or are you just trying to distract us from the person that hired you?"

The brother at the wheel ignored the other's closeness this time around, not missing a beat as he responded with, "Are you positive that it wasn't *you* who hired me?"

Gilbert's smile only widened and he barked out a laugh, having not expected much more than one of Ludwig's classic eye rolls. His straight-laced little brother was obviously beginning to enjoy this, and hell, so was Gilbert, although he'd initially found the murder mystery theme a bit cheesy. "If anything, Feli's the murder."

"What! I would never murder anyone!"

Gilbert smirked and shook his head, his tone chastising. "Oh, come on. A middle-aged ex-con turned school librarian? I'm supposed to believe that?"

Oh. Right. Feliciano blushed. He was Alman Acks tonight, a 40 year old university librarian, not Feliciano Vargas. This was all starting to feel a little too real. And that made it all the more fun.

“But I’ve changed! I’m a good guy now! 15 years is a long time, you know,” Feliciano said with a pout.

“Pfft. So, you’ve turned over a new leaf, huh?” Feliciano nodded vigorously. “Ever heard of a cover-up job?”

Feliciano’s eyebrows rose as he considered Gilbert’s theory, and he tilted his head helplessly to the side, laughing weakly. "I guess we'll just have to wait and see then."

Ludwig took a sharp right as prompted by his GPS, veering into a short path of heavily forested road. The severe lack of street lights was a little unnerving, and he reduced his speed to accommodate his worsening eyesight. As he began to ask Feliciano if he was sure they

were headed in the right direction, he found his answer in what appeared at the end of the road, standing tall under the high-beam glow of his headlights.

“We’re here!”

Ludwig’s mouth fell open. Feliciano hadn't been exaggerating at all. Their host's house *was* "reeeeally nice." It was so nice, in fact, that it had its own gate surrounding it, barring entry to those who were not welcome on the property.

"*Von wegen...*" Gilbert scrambled to get a better look out the window. "*Wohnt er hier? Nee, oder?*"

Feliciano nodded. "Yep, this is his place. Well, in summer anyway." He smiled sheepishly when the two of them stared back at him blankly, prompting him to elaborate. "He stays here with his grandparents when they come here on vacation from Poland."

Ludwig, or Wesson N. Smith as he would also be known for the night, let off the gas as the house grew nearer, too stunned to really say anything more than, "I see..."

Gilbert blinked a few times. Yep. That was a fucking mansion. Feliks Łukasiewicz was hosting this thing in a fucking mansion. Feliks was a damn classy dude, but Gilbert would have never imagined that they'd be pulling up to something like this. The mere sight of it was almost intimidating. Bricks of the richest and creamiest white, more windows than Gilbert could count, and columns that looked as if they'd been stolen from the Pantheon itself. It appeared to glow from the inside out, windows lit orange as silhouettes mingled throughout the house.

Gilbert narrowed his eyes at the back of Feliciano's head, curious. "How are you not freaking out right now?"

"Because I helped plan the party," he said, so casually that Ludwig thought he'd heard wrong. "I've been here twice already."

"Twice?"

He smiled, tongue poking through his lips in Ludwig's direction. "And you say I'm no good at keeping secrets."

"Yeah," Gilbert said, still staring the house down, "this is a huge ass secret."

"I was pretty surprised when I found out too," Feliciano laughed. "But I can understand why he didn't mention it outright. It would've attracted too much attention, and he only wanted to invite people who he knew would respect his grandparent's home."

It made Feliciano warm and fuzzy to think about the fact that he was one of those fifty guests, his friendship with Feliks born from a mutual love of art. It had been over a year ago when Feliks came bursting through the art room one day after school, pleading for someone, anyone who could paint a landscape for the backdrop of an upcoming play. The original artist had "totally bailed" and the play was next week, he'd explained, promising free tickets and

refreshments to the kind soul who'd be up to the task. Feliciano loved painting landscapes, and his rainbow-stained hand had shot up even before the panicked drama kid had finished speaking.

Feliks had been so happy that he hugged Feliciano right then and there, ignoring Feliciano's cries about getting his nice clothes dirty with paint. Feliciano discovered that he quite liked working with large scale art and lent his talents to the drama club full time, where he and Feliks became good friends. The fact that he and Ludwig's most recent date was spent in the front row of an after-school showing of the Nutcracker had been a welcome bonus.

"Ja, that makes sense," Gilbert replied. "But this is just..."

"Unexpected," Ludwig finished for him.

"Well, I told you it was nice, didn't I?" Feliciano giggled.

"So you know what's going down tonight?" Gilbert asked.

"No, no," he insisted. "I'm just as clueless as everyone else. I only helped with decorations. I didn't even know we'd be getting new identities!"

Gilbert looked out of the window again as Ludwig stopped some feet away from the gate, gaping at the house as if it were a mirage that would vanish once they reached its steps. As his eyes fell from the snow-dusted rooftops to the double wide French doors in front, he let loose a low whistle of fascination. And to think he'd been going to wear jeans and a simple sweater. Good thing he'd actually read the invitation.

He was startled when he'd spotted the word "cocktail" on his invitation, unsure about what exactly he should wear to what he thought would be an average house party. The fancy lettering and high quality cardstock paper should've given it away, really, but Gilbert had just assumed that Feliks was just being Feliks, all preppy and artsy and shit. Through his fogged over window he watched a girl in a shimmery dress and heels hurry through the doors to escape the cold, and suddenly he didn't feel so overdressed. He peered into the rear view mirror and smoothed at his tie before glancing down at the oxfords on his feet, grinning at his fine polishing work.

The last time Gilbert had been so dressed up he was a mere thirteen, following alongside his fancy diplomat father in a suit he hated, to have dinner with some frumpy old German politician he couldn't give a shit about. The clothes had felt awkward and stiff on his adolescent body, and he'd wriggled straight out of them as soon as the opportunity provided itself, vowing never again to subject himself to such torture. But this time was different.

His shoulders, no longer scrawny, filled out his jacket perfectly, and his belt sat comfortably snug at his waist, pants flush and crisp against his legs as if they'd been cut just for him. And damn did he feel great. Sitting back in his seat, he smiled to himself, wondering what Matthew would look like tonight. Wondering if Matthew had spent as much time as he had trying on and tearing off clothes until he finally found an outfit that he felt was worthy. And then he felt his face grow warm. Because he was thinking about Matthew. Again.

He couldn't help the way his pale fingers drummed against the door handle, itching to get inside and see the boy who'd made him wish that the hands on his watch would tick faster, made him wish that the sun would set sooner, that night would fall quickly and the snow would have mercy on them as they took to the road, if only to bring him that much closer to Matthew. Gilbert leaned back against his head rest as his cheeks grew warmer, closing his eyes in silent acceptance.

Love. So that's what this was, huh?

His eyes fluttered open as a thought came to him, and he sat upright in his seat. He pulled out his phone from his pocket and had the strong urge to kiss it, because it was the reason why he hadn't lost his sanity yet. The past ten days of winter break had also meant spending the last ten days without seeing Matthew, and Gilbert would have been lying if he'd said he wasn't experiencing slight (major) withdrawals.

He began scrolling through a conversation he and Matthew had earlier that night, lips curling into a small smile. Matthew didn't text often (it was annoying to listen to the alphabet every time he typed, he'd said, and awkward to use voice-to-text when it only worked half the time), so on the rare occasions when he did, and on the extremely rare occasions when it was more than just a sentence or two, Gilbert felt positively spoiled.

[5:11] Lawen Order? That's your name? Seriously?

[5:12] Fucking awesome isn't it?

[5:13] It's terrible

[5:14] Wow way to be an asshole Mattie

[5:14] Don't come crying to me when you need a badass attorney to save your ass

[5:16] I'm a birdwatcher...I doubt I'll be needing your badass services

[5:17] Ok what that's actually really cute

[5:18] It's boring!

[5:18] No that's so fucking cute end of discussion

[5:20] But I wanted to be something pool

[5:22] Yeah I'm pretty sure you didn't wanna be a pool Mattie

[5:24] I mint cool

[5:25] Mint? Yeah i guess mints are pretty cool

[5:26] Gil I meant meant!

[5:27] Wow you must've really meant it if you said it twice

[5:29] Oh my god I hate you

[5:31] But Mattie your voice typos are so damn cute can you blame me?

[5:32] No...I blame Siri. But that last one wasn't a typo!

[5:32] I know

[5:32] Immer noch süß >:D

[5:33] You know she can't read me German Gil :/

[5:34] Nothing you haven't heard before

[5:34] Please continue

[5:35] With the "cute" typos or our current topic?

[5:36] Both preferably

[5:36] You're ridiculous

[5:37] Don't act like you don't love it

[5:39] Who's acting?

[5:40] I know when my clients are lying to me Matthew

[5:42] Yeah well

[5:42] I know 45 different bird calls :/

[5:45] Oh my god thats fucking adorable

[5:47] You wouldn't say that if I was a safecracker or a drug lord or something >:(

[5:48] Nah I probably would. You'd just make those cute too tbh

[5:50] Gilbert!

[5:51] Hey I'm just sayin

[5:51] So what's your name anyway?

[6:00] Mattie?

[6:02] Sorry I was getting a snack

[6:03] Wow

[6:03] And you said my name was bad

[6:05] I hate that I'm laughing

[6:05] That wasn’t even that funny

[6:07] Yeah keep telling yourself that >:D where’s my reward for making you laugh?

[6:08] A name would be awesome

[6:09] I'll tell you later

[6:10] Why later?

[6:12] Because it's even worse than yours...

[6:13] Seriously? What is it?

[6:15] You’ll find out tonight

[6:16] Mattie pls I'm too awesome for this suspense shit

[6:18] But apparently not too awesome to beg :)

[6:19] Did you just

[6:20] You smug little shit

[6:20] :)

[6:21] I learned from the best didn’t I?

[6:22] Damn right you did

[6:22] Now tell me your name

[6:22] It’s gotta be cute Mattie I mean come on

[6:23] You’re a BIRDWATCHER

[6:25] Tonight!

[6:27] If this isn’t the most embarrassing name I hear tonight then I’ve got a shit ton of bad jokes with your name on it

[6:29] Deal!

[6:30] I’ll see you soon Gil :)

[6:30] Later Mattie

"Are you going to call him?"

Gilbert's eyes snapped up to see Feliciano looking right back at him, wearing a smile that was too sweet to be taken as anything other than trouble. "W-What?"

"You look like you want to." He laughed at the way Gilbert flushed, shrugging his shoulders like a child caught with cookie crumbs at the corners of his mouth. "You can do more with your phone than just smile at it, silly."

Ludwig was preoccupied with finding exactly where they should enter, but he found himself fighting back a smile while he circled the gate's perimeter, listening to his boyfriend pester his brother.

"I wasn't—" the way Feliciano's lips quirked at one corner let Gilbert know that the sentence wasn't worth finishing. "Ah, fuck it," he sighed. "I'm excited, alright? Sue me." The smile he wore was unusually subdued, a modest tugging of his lips as he glanced out the window. Again, he looked down at his phone, thumb gliding over the dimly-lit screen. Why was he hesitating? It wasn't like it was the first time he'd be dialing Matthew's number. So why were his palms so sweaty?

"Sooo?"

"So what?"

"Why don't you give him a call?" Feliciano eyed the phone in Gilbert's hand, entirely too invested in his next moves. He really just wanted to eavesdrop. "Don't you want to?"

Gilbert gulped. *Hell* fucking yeah, he did. But as much as Gilbert hated to admit it, he was in uncharted territory. A simple phone call wasn't a simple phone call anymore when he was *in fucking love* with the person on the other end. It wasn't just a phone call anymore when he knew that other person had feelings for him too. When he didn't know if those feelings were as strong as his own. It didn't help that Feliciano was staring at him like that either.

"I could dial for you," he teased.

"Yeah." Gilbert smirked, shoving his phone away and out of sight. "And you could put my balls in keepsake jar while you're at it."

"Hm?" Feliciano frowned. "Balls?" But as soon as he'd said it out loud it clicked. He pouted at Gilbert's reflection.

Ludwig rolled his eyes as Gilbert cackled, rolling down the window as he came to a stop in front of the gate's entrance. He leaned slightly out the open window and pressed the buzzer, jumping as a voice answered almost immediately.

“State your purpose,” came a voice, detached and startlingly cold.

"A-Ah, yes. We're here for the—"

"Read the back of your invitation, Lutz. We're not gettin' in otherwise."

"Oh," he said, clearing his throat. “Right.” He took the invitation he'd received two weeks ago from his pocket, flipping it over to reveal a single phrase. Leaning outside again, he read the words aloud, feeling a bit silly as they left his mouth. "We want to know whodunit." He stiffened at the sudden sensation of Feliciano's hand on his thigh, his boyfriend leaning into him to shout through the window.

"Hi, Feliks!"

"Feli!" The sudden squeal of glee spilling from the speaker left both Ludwig and Gilbert dumbfounded.

"Uh huh, it's me!"

“Geez, you went and made me break character!” he huffed, the sound followed by more laughter. “How was I?”

“Are you kidding? That was amazing!” Feliciano cried. There was a reason why Feliks was always snagging the lead roles. “You should see Lud and Gil’s faces,” he snickered. “They had no idea.”

"Tell your boyfriend he gets bonus points for the most awkwardly cute 'whodunit' I've heard all night. Like, seriously."

Gilbert snorted from the back and Feliciano giggled quietly, enjoying the way Ludwig's face was changing color. "Where should we park?"

While Feliks and Feliciano prattled on about the latest theatre gossip between parking directions, Gilbert's cell found its way into his hands again. He sent out one last text, heart leaping as he hit send.

[8:03] I really can’t wait to see you.

"Oh, look, here's one for you!"

Lovino stared at his boyfriend as he dug through a box of cheesy photo booth props, grinning like he'd struck gold. He looked so damn ridiculous wearing those tacky New Years glasses, loaded with so much glitter that he could see gold specks fill the air every time Antonio moved. But with the way that vest was hugging his torso...Lovino allowed his eyes to wander freely. *Fuck, who was he kidding? Antonio could break into jumping jacks right then and there and Lovino would still want to kneel between his legs. The bastard.*

"Here, try this one!" Lovino grimaced as Antonio held out a stick prop, a paper mustache on the end. What the fuck did a mustache have to do with the new year?

"No."

"Aw, c'mon," Antonio pouted. "It's real easy to use, see? You just hold it up like this." He positioned the fake mustache just below his nose. And before Lovino could catch himself, he snorted.

"You like it," Antonio beamed. And Lovino really wished he'd stop talking with that ugly thing against his face.

"*No*," he said again, hiding the way his lips trembled with his hand. "I'm not wearing that cheesy shit."

"Ayyy Lovino," he whined, "It's a photo booth. The stuff's supposed to be silly."

"I know that," he grumbled, arms crossed at his chest. Antonio's hands came to rest on his elbows, slowly unfolding his arms until Lovino's hands were in his own. And then he gave Lovino that damn look. That look that made his cheeks flare. Those soft eyes that made his breath catch and his legs feel like jello.

"I just want to see you have fun, *corazón*."

God fucking *damn* him, Lovino thought, feeling himself melt from the inside out. He looked down, his face growing darker, eyes landing on the box full of props on the table beside them. How the hell could he say no to that?

"What's that green thing?" he mumbled, prompting Antonio to follow his gaze. Antonio reached into the box and pulled it out. A masquerade mask. He looked at his boyfriend, hopeful.

"Alright," Lovino sighed, taking the mask from his hand. "Anything but that stupid mustache."

He'd barely had time to put the mask on before Antonio was dragging him toward the booth in the corner of the room, and Lovino couldn't even be mad because the smile on Antonio's face was compensation enough. Once the two had huddled inside, closing the curtain behind them, Lovino sat back while Antonio fiddled with the settings on the screen, wondering when the hell photo booths had gotten so damn complicated. It took him a moment to realize that the other was staring at him. He may have missed a breath when Antonio smiled at him, but no one but him had to know that.

"What?"

"Nothing," he said, eyes half-lidded. "I'm just admiring how cute you look in that mask."

Lovino flushed, tearing his eyes away from Antonio's lest he find himself unable to do anything else. "Just press the damn button already," he said, his voice not nearly as harsh at his words would suggest. He felt the beginnings of a smile on his lips at the sound of the other's laughter in his ear, and did nothing to stop the arm that came around his waist once the timer had started counting down. And suddenly, the mustache made a comeback. In one swift motion, Antonio had the prop against his face just as before, and what happened next, well, he couldn't have wished for anything more.

Lovino couldn't help himself, bursting into laughter at the sight. "You idiot! W-Why did you bring that in here?”

“Because I noticed how much you liked it,” he answered, pulling Lovino into his lap.

“Toni, s-stop, it's—" his words were lost in more laughter. "I-It's taking pictures!"

"Is it?" He chuckled, burying his face into the crook of Lovino's neck, lips curling into a smile against that ticklish spot that only Antonio knew where to find. It was amazing. To feel the vibrations of his warm laughter. To feel it seep into his skin, dance along his eardrums. His softened gaze caressed the contours of Lovino’s face, flushed the color of sun-ripened tomatoes, and Antonio wondered what on earth he had done to deserve someone so beautiful.

"Damn you," he sighed, smiling as he caught his breath.

He was answered with a nose nuzzling against his neck, and Lovino turned slightly, yanking on the other’s neck tie to capture his lips in a soft kiss, a gentle melding of lips that made every muscle in Antonio’s body go slack. His shoulders slumped, and his hands fell to Lovino's hips as one kiss became two, two became three, until suddenly, his phone buzzed. Antonio stopped momentarily, but he had no intentions of entertaining the noise, and he closed the distance between them again, moaning at the sensation of Lovino’s tongue in his mouth. But then Lovino’s phone buzzed. And then Antonio’s buzzed—again.

“What the fuck?” he slurred as he pulled away from Antonio, the last thing he felt like doing at the moment. And from the look on Antonio’s face, he wasn’t all that pleased about it either.

“We’re popular tonight, aren’t we?” he said, digging into his pocket with a wry smile.

Lovino grumbled as he did the same. “This better be real fucking—” His words faded into nothing once he saw who had dared possess the audacity to interrupt them, and he rolled his eyes, hard, agonizingly slow. Of fucking course.

[8:04] Hey losers guess who just showed up!

[8:04] Where are you two anyway?

[8:05] You guys seen Mattie?

[8:05] Pls tell me youve seen Mattie

"I swear to god, if they don't get together by then end of the night, I'm going to strangle one of them." His scowl deepened as Antonio began to laugh. "You think I won't do it?" He would. He *so* fucking would. In his mind. And then he would shove them into each other face-first. His lips formed a pout as his boyfriend nuzzled his nose.

"You shouldn't talk like that when there's a murderer on the loose," he teased, lifting Lovino's mask from over his eyes. "People might start getting the wrong idea."

Lovino shrugged. "Whoever lets themselves get killed by an idiot named Basil fucking Sage probably deserved it."

Basil Sage: master chef, 5-star restaurant owner, and author of New York's best-selling cookbook. All of that success canceled out by a god-awful name. It was a hell of a lot better than Billy Joe Jackson, that was for sure. Country singer Antonio. Lovino had laughed himself to tears when he'd first found out.

"Cute *and* murderous." Antonio reveled in the way the other smirked back at him. "And I still want to kiss you."

Lovino huffed out a laugh and fingered the topmost button of Antonio's vest, inching closer as he breathed, "Then do it." And just as his eyes began to close, just as he began to feel the warmth of those soft lips nearing his...

[8:08] Hallooooo?

The scowl that came to Lovino's face was wiped clean, and his voice caught in his throat with curse words that would never surface. He gasped softly as Antonio kissed him again, deeper, messier, tongue lapping around inside every inch of his mouth. He thanked whatever god there might be for the music and droning conversation, because the noises he was making weren't hidden too well behind the booth's flimsy red curtain. He was so dazed as Antonio pulled away that he couldn't even remember what he'd been about to say. He couldn't think about anything really when he was giving him that look. That damn look, darkened with lust.

"I think that'll hold us over while we deal with Gilbert, *a que sí?*" He felt Lovino shudder as he placed one last kiss along his neck. "Could you grab our pictures?"

Lovino nodded, or at least he thought he did; he was still somewhat disoriented. He left Antonio's lap for his spot beside the curtain, pulling it back just enough to reach out and tear the photo strips from the outside dispenser. He found himself flushing as he glanced them over, because they actually looked...decent. He looked up from his hands when Antonio took his own copy, feeling a little self conscious as he brought it closer to his face. Did the bastard really have to stare at them like that?

"God...you're so beautiful when you're laughing."

He looked over at Lovino, who glanced down and away, cheeks a deepening scarlet. Did he not realize how freaking *cute* he was when he did that? "Since you liked my fake mustache so much, maybe I'll start growing a real one." Lovino looked at him with a mixture of horror and disgust, and Antonio grinned. "No?"

"*Fuck* no."

The two broke into laughter as Lovino lightly shoved him, and Antonio carefully slipped the photos into his pocket before pulling out his phone again. The ellipsis that greeted him let him know that Gilbert was in the middle of typing, and judging from how much time had passed since Gilbert's last message (an astonishing ten minutes), it was safe to assume that Gilbert was becoming impatient. And it made Antonio feel almost sorry for what he was about to do. Almost, he thought, smirking to himself.

"What are you telling him?" Lovino asked as the other began to type, doing his best to look disinterested.

"That we haven't seen Matthew, and that we're up on the terrace," he said, hitting send. "That'll give us time to meet up with Feli and Ludwig here."

"And what about Matt?"

"Al said they'd be here soon. Then we'll have Feli snag Matthew while Ludwig takes Gilbert."

"Ok..."

"And then we'll check in with Al and Ivan to make sure everything's going as it should."

Lovino seemed to muse a little before he sat back and crossed his arms, the answer satisfactory. "God, this better work."

"Alfred seems pretty confident about it."

"Of course he does," he scoffed. "It's *his* damn idea."

Lovino had been utterly confused, if not a bit miffed, when Alfred had plopped himself at the foot of their lunch table the day before break. He hadn't had chemistry until the following period, and so he really hadn't understood why Alfred was already in his face. It wasn't that he hated Alfred per se, he actually had a lot of respect for how he looked after Matthew; being an older brother himself, Lovino could relate. It was just that he'd been in the middle of shoving food into his mouth because he was really fucking hungry, and he hadn't appreciated the cheeky smile the blond bastard had given him.

"You know, the food's not going anywhere." The laugh that slipped from Antonio was cut short by a kick to his ankle beneath the table.

"What the fuck do you want?" Lovino asked, but only after he'd swallowed. Because he fucking had *manners*, and didn't interrupt people while they were eating.

"Alfred?" Feliciano poked his head out from behind Ludwig, whose heavy build unintentionally hid the smaller boy from view. "You don't have lunch right now, do you?"

"Nope. I'm skipping." Alfred quickly looked around the cafeteria before leaning in closer, earning confused glances from the others in front of him. "Look guys, I gotta make this quick. It's about Matthew and Gilbert." Ivan would be stopping Gilbert in the halls right about now, and that meant Alfred was running out of time.

Both Antonio and Feliciano eagerly huddled in closer, slowly followed by Ludwig and Lovino.

"What about them?" Antonio's eyes practically sparkled. "Are they together now?"

"No." Antonio groaned. "Look, Gilbert doesn't know it yet, and Lud, you can't tell him this," Ludwig shrunk back a bit as a finger was pointed in his direction, "but I'm meeting with him later today to speed things along. Gil likes Mattie, Mattie likes Gil. I know it, you guys know it, so that's settled. We've gotta get them to tell *each other* that. I mean, what's it been, like, four months almost?"

"Feels like it's been fucking four years," Lovino mumbled.

"How are we going to do it?" Feliciano was getting more excited by the second.

"This is how we're going to do it."

Alfred pulled out a small envelope from his pocket and placed it on the table. His invitation. The same invitation that all of them had found in their lockers that morning. "It's going to happen at the New Years party."

Ludwig still didn't quite understand. "How can you be certain?"

"Because I've got a plan that'll make sure it does." Alfred grinned. "You guys just have to help me with it."

Keep them as far away from each other for as long as they possibly could. "Them" being Matthew and Gilbert. Lovino had thought Alfred was a special grade of stupid when he'd said it, because it was exactly the opposite of what they all wanted. But once Alfred had explained himself, it had started to made more sense. In a sadistic sort of way. Once they ended the stunt, Alfred had insisted, they wouldn't be able to pull Gilbert and Matthew apart. One of them *would* break before the night was over.

"Well, I think it'll work," Antonio said, ever the optimist. He pulled back the red curtain, allowing Lovino to step out the booth before he followed suit. "Absence makes the heart grow fonder, right?"

Lovino gave a dry laugh, but was otherwise silent. He looked through the crowded room as polaroids flashed and laughter erupted, spotting his brother stepping in from the hallway with Ludwig, who was looking more little-brother-worthy than he'd ever care to admit with Feliciano at his arm. As Antonio waved them down, he grinned with anticipation.

"It'll work."

"Yeah," Lovino said, a smirk twitching into place. "We'll see."

The moment he stepped inside, Matthew was reminded that this was not the average home. The floor beneath his feet—he had never felt anything quite like it. It almost froze him where he stood, how smooth and polished it felt against the soles of his shoes. With each step he took, Matthew breathed in his surroundings, and it was as if everything, all at once, was vying for his attention. He could hear jazz; the purring of a saxophone, the gentle tapping of symbols, piano keys flirting with drums. His nose was pleasantly overwhelmed by the scents of December, sharp, rich pine, burning wood, the telltale tickle of nutmeg and cinnamon. But what grabbed his attention most was the endless movement of bodies. The people.

There were so many people. Talking, laughing, their voices carrying in the echoes that sprung from the walls. Matthew could feel them slipping past him, some simply walking, others hurrying, absorbed in their own conversations. He had the sudden urge shrink into himself, to bow his head low and tune out every syllable, and before he knew it his heart was racing. He missed a breath, his next breath deeper than the one before it, and the next somewhat shallow. And instantly he knew. Knew why his body was reacting the way it was, why this feeling felt so familiar.

All of these people, talking, moving around him, these were people he went to school with. People he'd passed in the halls. The halls where he'd heard whispers, where he'd felt people distance themselves. Where he'd wonder if he was walking too slow, or if his expression was strange, or if his cane was really just that intimidating. That anxiousness, that instinctive aversion to scrutiny, that feeling of otherness that he hadn't experienced in months—it had come flooding back to Matthew in an instant, so quick that his own reaction shocked even himself.

But Matthew held his head high despite himself, willing his heart to calm and his breaths to level, because he had long left such thoughts behind and he had no intentions of welcoming them back. He was done being apologetic for who he was. He was sick of tailoring his every move, gesture, and facial expression to make himself more approachable, sacrificing his own comfort for the comfort of others.

He had friends now. *Real* friends who didn't care if his eyes were a little "off," or that he took the stairs a little slower, or that he wasn't particularly skilled with his emoji keyboard. (Why on *earth* were there so many to choose from? Parentheses and colons suited him just fine.) Matthew had never imagined that it could feel *this* good, to finally be content within himself. And to think it had all started with a peculiar German boy, pulling him out from the darkest of shadows, leaving him dazed on the highest of clouds. His face tingled as he thought of what he would say, what he would do when he saw Gilbert again. He just barely caught his brother speaking his name.

"You good, Mattie?" he asked, looking back at his brother to be sure he wasn't falling too far behind in the sea of suits and cocktail dresses. Alfred was just a few steps ahead, and while the foyer wasn't completely full, there were still a lot of people, and he wanted to make sure Matthew was comfortable. Ivan was following close behind his twin (looking hot as all fuck in Alfred's humble opinion), glaring occasionally at anyone who decided they wanted to stare at Matthew for longer than was deemed appropriate.

"I'm fine," he called back. He grinned before adding, "The floor is really nice." He heard Ivan chuckle at his side, and Ivan's gaze fell to the white marble on which he stood, his reflection shown back at him in the high-gloss finish.

"Yes, it is quite nice," he agreed, though it was the chandeliers hanging above them that had first stolen his attention.

"Dude," Alfred laughed, "the floor's not even the half of it."

Matthew smiled as he followed the sound of Alfred's footsteps out of the foyer and further down the hall, craning his neck upwards to face Ivan. Ivan reflexively leaned in to

accommodate their height difference, raising a brow when Matthew's smile went a bit crooked. And then he whispered, "Duuuuuude."

Ivan giggled softly and glanced forward at Alfred, who was mumbling something aloud about how he hoped they were going to the right place. "Duuuuuude," Ivan replied, Matthew stifling his own laughter. But the hall wasn't as noisy as the front entrance, and their whispers had been too loud. Perhaps on purpose. Alfred paused in his rambling and sent a glare over his shoulder, huffing when the two broke into laughter.

"Real funny."

Yeah, maybe he had been a little limited with his word choice when they first arrived; *excuse him* for not knowing he'd be pulling up to a house the size of freaking Mars. Ivan smirked at him, his cool gaze leaving Alfred's narrowed eyes for his pouty lips. He was a bit disappointed that the supple flesh wasn't currently between his teeth. But the night was still very young, and he was quite confident he could change that.

"*Prosti menya, Fredka,*" he said, and Alfred shivered. "I only mock you to see the precious faces you make." His reward came in the pretty pink that flushed across Alfred's face.

"Shut up," was all Alfred could say before he turned back around, hating the way his body reacted to the sound of the other's native tongue. "Just help me look for this damn tree."

"Tree?" Matthew echoed. "Like a Christmas tree?"

Alfred nodded. "Yep," he replied. "It's where we're going to meet up with the others. Kinda like our home base for the night."

"Oh." Matthew's heart did a backflip. "W-Where is it?"

Alfred pursed his lips as he turned the corner. "Feli said it's in the—" He stopped abruptly as they crossed into the living room, where said tree stood tall against the back wall, so massive that every person who walked passed it seemed to momentarily shrink. And it was no skimpy tree; its pine needles were plentiful and lush, absolutely covered in lights, ribbons, and charming little ornaments.

"I've found it," Ivan said, joining Alfred at his side.

Alfred smiled wryly at him before returning his attention to the tree. "Man, it's gotta be at least fifteen feet. How the hell do you decorate something that big?"

Ivan found himself smiling at the unique array of ornaments, feeling strangely nostalgic. "I'm sure the owners of this home can afford to hire professionals to do it for them."

"Professional Christmas tree decorators? Is that even a thing?"

Ivan hummed the affirmative. "It is not so much the decorating that gives you the professional title. It is the skill in not falling to your death."

Matthew snorted from Alfred's opposite side. "Is it really that big?"

"For once, he is not exaggerating," Ivan replied, earning a half-hearted glare from his boyfriend.

"It's huge, Matt. Like, someone's-dying-if-that-thing-falls-over huge." The way Matthew's face lit up told Alfred what he was going to say even before he opened his mouth to say it.

"Could you take me a little closer? Your description was beautiful, of course," he teased, "but I still want to see it for myself."

"Sure, Mattie," Alfred laughed, reminded once again of why he'd make a terrible author. He'd always been grateful for his brother's patience in that regard. He held out his arm for Matthew to take hold.

"Wait!" Alfred's eyes bugged when Matthew squeezed his arm, pulling him back just as he'd begun to walk. Matthew felt like slapping himself. How could he have forgotten just that quick? Did he still look ok? Was his tie still straight? Had those fly-away's his father smoothed away come back just to spite him?

"What is wrong, Matvey?" Ivan asked, looking just as concerned as Alfred.

"Nothing, I just—" Oh, great. Now he was blushing. A bright red face was sure to make a wonderful impression. "Do you...do you see Gilbert?"

Alfred breathed a sigh of relief. "God, Matthew. I almost had a heart attack."

"Sorry..."

He sighed again, the sound fond this time around. "No, he's not. No one else has shown up yet. So we're just gonna wait for them here."

"O-Oh. Alright." He felt a gentle hand on his shoulder.

"Matt, what did you come here to do?"

"To..." He gulped. "To have fun."

"Exactly. And you can't do that if you're all tense like this," Alfred said, giving his shoulder a playful squeeze.

"I know," Matthew sighed, suddenly feeling ridiculous. "I know...it's just—"

"Gilbert's gonna flatline when he sees you."

Matthew drew in a sudden breath, and Alfred could hear his voice catch in his throat as he went to speak. But ultimately, nothing came out.

"That's what's got you so nervous, isn't it? What he's gonna think?" Matthew was silent, but the answer was written clearly in the flushed apples of his cheeks. "Look, however nervous you are right now, multiply that by fifty. Because that'll be Gilbert while he's trying to pick his jaw up off the floor."

Matthew ducked his head, abashed. "...Off the floor, huh?"

"Yep." Alfred grinned. "Bet you'll hear it hit the floor yourself."

Matthew laughed. "Don't be ridiculous."

"I mean it. You look great. He won't know what hit 'im." Alfred smiled as his brother grinned back at him.

"You give the best pep talks, you know."

And he meant it. Alfred always knew how to ease his mind and soothe away his worries. It had always been that way, even when they were young children. Even at four years old Alfred had known exactly what to say, crawling into his bed, taking his tiny hand, and chasing his nightmares away. Matthew thought about it a lot, those miserable nights of crying until he had no more tears left to shed, until his head ached and his voice grew hoarse. The memories always led back to Alfred. Because it was him who had put an end to it all.

"Don't cry," Alfred had said. Matthew could still remember how much of his own snot and tears had made it onto Alfred's beloved Buzz Lightyear shirt, forming a dark splotch at the edge of his sleeve. But Alfred hadn't cared at all, and as Matthew wiped at his nose, Alfred declared that he would find his brother a brand new pair of eyes, ones that weren't sick, ones that the doctors wouldn't take from him. "Don't you know? I'm your big brother, and that means I'm gonna take care of you always." He'd grabbed for Matthew's hand, linking their pinkies together with a little squeeze. "Promise."

They were words he would never forget, whispered in darkness. Darkness that would soon become Matthew's whole world. And Matthew had nodded and closed his tired eyes, sighed as his pillow became a cloud beneath his head, drifting, lulling him to sleep, his fingers curled around those of his flesh and blood, of Alfred, whose words were like light. A warm, bright light that even he could see, that he knew would always be there. And all these years later still it shown, in his brother's words, as bright and warm as ever.

Alfred's smile widened as he adjusted his tie, and he winked. "Keep scaring the shit outta me and there's plenty more where that came from."

Matthew smirked. "Noted."

"Now, c'mon," Alfred said, holding out his arm again.

Matthew nodded and took hold, laughing sheepishly as he faced Ivan. "Sorry about making you worry like that."

"*Nyet*," he said, following at his side. "I'm just glad you are alright."

It wasn't long at all before their designated base was towering over the three of them. Alfred and Ivan watched at a small distance as Matthew's hands brushed past pine needles, both shocked to discover, courtesy of Matthew's nose, that the monster of a tree was actually real,

which excited Matthew to a rather adorable degree. Their voices were low as they spoke, each with an ear perked at the ready should Matthew need them.

"You do know that was your fault, don't you?" Ivan said, looking over to the blond at his side.

"I know," Alfred said, watching his brother prod gingerly at ornaments.

"If he had his phone, he would be less anxious."

"True. But if he had his phone, this whole thing would be pointless."

"Also true."

Alfred reached into his left pocket and took out one of two phones he was currently in possession of. The one Matthew thought he'd left at home. They'd been on the road for about fifteen minutes before Matthew had reached into his coat pocket to discover that his phone wouldn't respond to him. Because it wasn't his phone. It was his brother's.

Alfred had felt so cruel when he'd snagged Matthew's phone from his computer desk that evening and replaced it with his. Even more so when Matthew had slipped it into his pocket thinking it was his own. It was a silly little mixup; they had the same phone after all, Matthew had reasoned, and Alfred had played along, his twin ultimately refusing his offer to turn the car around. Cruel perhaps, but also necessary. It had been silenced for the time being, and Alfred couldn't do much of anything with it as it was password locked, but that didn't matter, because he hadn't stolen his brother's phone to snoop. All that mattered was that it was out of Matthew's hands, and that meant the link between he and Gilbert was effectively severed. For now, anyway. Ivan rose a brow when Alfred laughed suddenly.

"What is it?"

"More like *who*," he replied, pointing to the message displayed across Matthew's locked screen. It'd been received about fifteen minutes ago, and, apparently, Gilbert couldn't wait to see Matthew. But this was fifteen minutes ago, and Alfred was sure Gilbert was getting just as antsy as Matthew. Hell, as far as Gilbert knew, Matthew hadn't even arrived yet.

"This stunt of our's is not going to last very long I imagine," Ivan chuckled.

"You think?" Alfred smirked and made note of the time. "I doubt they'll last for more than twenty minutes. Even that long might be pushing it a bit though," he said as an afterthought. "I wouldn't wanna torture 'em, y'know."

"Mm, of course not. It is not like you to inflict pain on others." Ivan glanced down to Alfred's neck, where the angry red remnants of lips against skin had long since faded away. He would fix that soon enough. "Though you seem to thoroughly enjoy being on the receiving end."

Alfred stiffened and did his best unintentional imitation of a fish, mouth opening and closing while he watched Ivan's chest rise and fall with deep, throaty laughter. Luckily for Ivan, whatever Alfred had been about to say was interrupted by the calling of his name. Alfred

turned around, as did Ivan and Matthew when their names were shouted as well, a candy cane falling to the floor as Matthew jumped.

"Over here!" Matthew's smile was immediate as he recognized the voice.

Alfred grinned as his eyes fell on Feliciano, the boy waving as he approached them. "Feli, you made it!"

"Mmhm!" he said, bouncing on the balls of his feet to the tempo of the music. "We got here a little early and split up to look around." He stilled as he looked up at Matthew, stunned by how different he looked with his hair pulled back, a few delicate waves framing his face, strands gathered into a ponytail at the nape of his neck. "Wow!" Feliciano exclaimed, startling Matthew as he took the other boy's hands. "Matthew, your hair looks great like that!"

Matthew gave a sheepish laugh. "Thanks, Feli."

"Oh, I almost forgot!" Feliciano took a few steps back, clearing his throat. "My name is Alman Acks. I'm a librarian." Sure, he used to steal people's identities, but, as per the instructions on his invitation, it was much too early in the game to reveal that.

Matthew bit the inside of his lip to keep himself from laughing. Maybe his name wasn't the worst there was after all.

"Evan K. Gordon," Ivan said, amused with how Feliciano's voice had lowered in pitch. "Some of my peers call me EKG. I'm a heart surgeon." He also did the occasional back alley operation to pay back his debts to the Italian mafia, but that certainly didn't make for a good first impression.

"Name's Kevin Cosmos." Alfred grinned. "NASA's greatest astronaut!"

"Ohh!"

"Right?"

"Wait, but why are you back on Earth?"

"Retired last year. Being the first man on Mars takes a lot outta you, y'know?" The drunken gambling he did in his free time was no one's business but his own. At least not until round two, anyway.

"Oooh." Matthew and Ivan both rolled their eyes almost simultaneously. Because the role was *so* Alfred. "What about you, Mattie?"

"Oh, um, I'm Avy Arie. I'm...a bird watcher," Matthew said, and it really was as simple as that. No tragic, devious backstory for him. Sometimes he camped out illegally in wildlife reserves though. Did spending a few nights in jail for trespassing count?

"Oh, like with the little binoculars?" Feliciano cupped his hands around his eyes to demonstrate. Matthew answered in the affirmative, blushing a bit at the utter dorkiness of it all. "Aww," he cooed, "how could you ever murder anyone?"

"Yeah," Alfred snorted, throwing an arm around Matthew in that way that annoyed him to no end. "I think it's safe to say Mattie's innocent."

"And Feliciano's not?" he said, pouting a bit. It's not like he wanted to *be* the murder or anything. But a little taste of fictional danger wouldn't have hurt. "He's just a librarian."

Feliciano laughed nervously.

"Well, anyone one of us could have done it," Ivan said. "We can't definitively rule anyone out. Librarians and bird watchers are not exempt."

"Eh, you're right. Feliks said it wouldn't be that predictable."

"Is everyone else on their way here now?" Matthew asked.

"Oh! That's actually why I'm here." Feliciano exchanged a look with Ivan and Alfred, and the two nodded. "The others aren't coming. Not yet, anyway."

"Wait, what?" Alfred silently congratulated himself for how natural he'd sounded.

Matthew frowned. "Why?"

"Well, Ludwig's trying to find Gilbert; he got lost." That brought a smile to Matthew's face. "And Antonio and Lovino are stuck in traffic," he lied. "I didn't want you guys to just stand here all night, so I came over to let you know."

"I see. So, should we meet at a later time then?" Ivan asked.

"Mmhm, Lovino told me they aren't too far away, and I'm sure Luddy will find Gilbert in no time, so let's all meet back here when everyone's made it inside, ok?"

"Well, alright," said Alfred, shrugging. "Guess we can look around in the meantime."

"Would you like me to show you around, Matthew?" Feliciano asked. "I can take you around to the main rooms, and hopefully we'll run into Luddy and Gilbert." Another look was exchanged, and everyone but Matthew knew that Feliciano's "hopefully" was a "definitely." Feliciano resisted the urge to squeal when Matthew's face flushed pink.

"Sure," he answered. "If you don't mind, I mean."

"Of course I don't! Let's go!"

Ivan and Alfred watched them disappear into the next room over before turning their attention to each other.

Ivan smirked. "You were surprisingly convincing."

"You had that little faith in me?" Alfred scoffed.

"You're a terrible liar."

"Shut up." He glanced down at his wristwatch to check the time. "We've gotta meet up with Toni and Lovino next. If they confirm that things are going smoothly, then we can rest easy."

"Good. Because as much as I enjoy this little matchmaking game," he said, slipping an arm around the other's waist, "most of my interest lies in spending this night together with you." Alfred gasped when Ivan pulled him closer, placing a hand on the larger boy's chest to steady himself. And Alfred found himself frozen as he looked into his eyes, incredibly tender under the lights of the chandelier that hung above them.

"Speechless?" Ivan asked, and Alfred could feel the vibrations of his laughter spread through his hand.

Don't give yourself so much credit.

...Is was what Alfred had wanted to say, but all he could manage was a pitiful shake of his head. Ivan chuckled once more as he leaned in, and Alfred slowly closed his eyes, his lips captured in Ivan's.

"As I said," Ivan whispered against his lips as he pulled away, Alfred looking rather lovely and red against the Christmas tree. "You're a terrible liar."

Ludwig sat quietly on a small ottoman, one of many that sat scattered about the terrace, surrounded by coffee tables and couches that gave the space a warm, lived-in feel despite it being exposed to the elements. His eyes followed his brother's figure, watched his shadow wander back and forth across the floor of the wooden deck, his footsteps more erratic by the second. If anyone had noticed his brother pacing like a madman, they must not have cared enough to show it. Perhaps especially due to the fact that he wasn't speaking English, and they couldn't understand him anyway. Either that, Ludwig figured, or the few people that were up there were too distracted by the sparklers in their hands to notice.

"Fuck," Gilbert swore, and Ludwig wondered if that was the fourth or fifth time; he couldn't remember. "Should I do it?" he asked, stopping abruptly, looking up from his phone to meet his little brother's gaze.

"Well—"

"Nah," he said quickly, feet back in motion. "It's cool. I'm cool."

"Are you?"

"Yeah." Gilbert stared at the set of numbers displayed across his touchscreen, a series of dashes and numbers that belonged to Matthew. His thumb hovered over the screen as he hesitated, knowing that should he touch it, there was no going back. He had played it over and over in his head, him bringing the phone to his ear, listening, waiting for the ringing to stop until he heard Matthew's voice on the other end. And what would he do then?

Ludwig watched Gilbert's teeth gnaw into his bottom lip and he smiled knowingly. "*Are* you?"

"You know I'm fucking not," he groaned, stopping to run a hand through his hair.

"You said it, not me."

"Why is this so difficult?" The way he threw his hands up looked rather dramatic against the bright orange flames that burned in the fire pit some feet behind him. "Since when can't I use a damn cell phone? It's just a *phone call* for Chrissake..." And yet his hand still refused to do what he wanted it to, locking his phone and shoving it back in his pocket. He made a strangled noise. "I should've just done it in the car."

"And why didn't you?"

"Because I wussed out and sent a text instead."

"Ah."

"'Cause we were already at the front gate and I thought, hey, I'll see him in a few minutes anyway, so I figured it'd be weird to call, you know?"

Ludwig nodded, not necessarily to agree, but to let his brother know he was listening .

"But now it's been, like, 45 minutes, and I feel like an idiot because texting *and* calling is gonna make me look pushy. And that's the *last* thing I wanna look like."

"You're overthinking it, Gilbert. They've been stuck in traffic for a while now—"

Ludwig grimaced at the fire pit as it popped and hissed, as if scolding him for the lie that had just come from his mouth. He hadn't *wanted* to deceive Gilbert, but he'd been so suddenly roped into this scheme that he hadn't even had the chance to object. But when he really thought about it, he supposed the results were far more important than the means. After all, even he had agreed, although not vocally, that the past four months of subtle flirting had gone on for long enough. And it was more than apparent that Gilbert had had enough of waiting too.

"I'd say your concern is valid," he finished.

Gilbert laughed, plopping himself into a seat across from Ludwig. "Even if it is, I probably wouldn't know what to say." He brought a hand lazily to his ear, holding out his thumb and pinky to mimic a phone. "Hey, Matt, I just wanted to make sure you were alright and let you know I'm going fucking crazy because I haven't seen your face in almost two weeks and I think it's slowly killing me." He laughed again, slowly slumping down in his chair and closing his eyes. "A beer would be great right about now."

"How about sparkling cider?" Gilbert groaned. "Gilbert, you have to keep calm. Matthew is on his way. Relax yourself." Red eyes creaked open.

"*You're* telling *me* to relax. At a party." He slowly sat up, head tilted to the darkened sky. "God, I really am going crazy." Ludwig rolled his eyes and got to his feet.

"We should get something to eat. You look pale."

"Yeah," he said, watching his breath leave his mouth and quickly vanish. "Albinism will do that to you."

The full moon was suddenly eclipsed by Ludwig's face, clearly not impressed.

"Sheesh, alright, *Mutti*," he muttered, following after Ludwig with a slight pout.

Once in the dining room, Gilbert helped himself to some hors d'oeuvres, though he would never understand what people found so appealing about putting tiny little foods on even tinier little sticks. He did ultimately settle for a few glasses of cider. The crisp taste made up for the lack of alcohol, and Gilbert sipped quietly off to the side while he scanned the room with Ludwig, who said Feliciano was on his way to meet them there. As he watched people come and go, nibble and sip, he realized that he'd yet to see Antonio and Lovino, who were *supposed* to be up on the terrace. But he couldn't find it in him to be all that upset, because although they were his friends, they were a couple too; they were probably busy doing shit couples do on New Year's Eve.

Gilbert spotted Feliciano the moment he walked in, beaming in that way he always did, eyes bright and full of energy. He returned Feliciano's wave as he and Ludwig began to cross the room, frowning when Feliciano looked back over his shoulder and went back into the hallway. "What's he—"

Gilbert sucked in his breath as he saw Feliciano re-enter the room, this time with someone else in tow. He mouthed the boy's name as Feliciano ushered him gently into the room, eyes frozen on honey-blond curls, and soft blue eyes, and lips that made his blood rush. They were crossing the room, smiling, saying things that Gilbert was too far away to hear. But Gilbert couldn't hear anything. Not the music, or the chatter, or the laughing. Not even his own thoughts. Nothing remained but the sound of his breaths and his own beating heart, pounding in his ears. And he stared. Broad shoulders. Long, lithe limbs. Crisp white cuffs. A sharp black tie. Gilbert took it all in, utterly intoxicated. And as the boy drew nearer, as Gilbert drew nearer, he suddenly realized that he hadn't actually spoken.

"Matthew!"

The boy gasped, eyes growing twice their normal size. "Gilbert?"

Feliciano broke into a wide grin at the way Gilbert frantically waved him over, as if Feliciano’s feet weren’t moving fast enough. And the way Matthew squeezed Feliciano’s hand was nothing short of adorable.

“We found him!” said Matthew through a breathless little laugh.

“I told you we would,” Feliciano said, catching and returning the smile Ludwig sent him from Gilbert’s side.

“Can you—Can you see him?” Matthew felt silly as soon as he asked, because what he’d really meant to say was, *can you take me to him?* But his face was already starting to grow warm, and that was as close as he was going to get. He gave his silent thanks when Feliciano’s steps quickened a bit, obviously sensing his urgency.

“Mmhm,” he responded. “He’s standing with Lud at the back. And he looks really happy to see you.”

Matthew’s smile had grown to show teeth now, and he just barely registered Feliciano’s “excuse us, pardon us” as they slipped through people standing at the middle of the floor. Matthew’s heart was thrashing in his chest, and when they came to stop, Feliciano dropped his hand, quickly replaced by a larger one.

“Get over here,” came Gilbert’s voice, and before Matthew knew it he was trapped between Gilbert’s arms, laughing out his name and returning his embrace. “Yeah," he said through a cheeky grin, "that’s the stuff.”

“God,” Matthew scoffed, smiling against Gilbert’s shoulder despite himself. “Weirdo.”

“Only for you.” Matthew laughed again, and Gilbert relished in the sound of it, in the way Matthew's body shook against him as he did so.

As they pulled away from each other, Gilbert was very aware of his hands, the way they lingered a little too long at Matthew's back despite his mind's objections. Hell. Who was he kidding? He'd *meant* to do that. He'd *wanted* to do that. And more than anything, he'd wanted Matthew to notice. That was why when they were face-to-face again, Gilbert's heart raced even faster. Because it was clear as day that Matthew had. Watching the rosy red color that had spread across Matthew’s cheeks made Gilbert’s own face warm and tingly, and now Matthew was adjusting his tie and thumbing at a cuff link and *Jesus Christ* he looked incredible.

Feliciano stared between the two boys just long enough to catch Gilbert swallow harder than was normal, and he held himself back from saying all the cheeky little things that came rushing into his mind. It was time for them to go. “Lud,” he said, looping his arm into Ludwig’s, “let’s go taste the cheese fondue before it’s all gone!”

Ludwig had quickly picked up on the mood as well, and was more than happy to finally leave the two be. Now he could leave this little stunt behind and spend the rest of the night as he intended. “Mm,” he said, pulling Feliciano closer. "Sounds good."

“Oh, God,” Matthew gasped upon hearing Ludwig’s voice. “I’m sorry, Ludwig, I’m so rude —“

“No, no,” he said, “it’s alright. There’s a lot going on tonight. Thanks for bringing me Feliciano.”

Matthew laughed. “It’s definitely the other way around, but sure.”

"Eh, don't worry about him, Matt," Gilbert scoffed. "He's used to living in my awesome shadow."

"Gilbert!" Matthew gasped, making to shove his arm. Gilbert simply cackled and took a step back to dodge him.

"All in favor of Gilbert finding his own ride home tonight, say 'aye.'" It was from Feliciano, and his answer to his own motion was instant. "Aye!"

"Aye," came Ludwig's voice right after.

Matthew blurted out the same without hesitation, the three of them laughing while Gilbert stood slack-jawed. But it didn't take long for a twisted smirk to take its place. He took a step forward, Matthew's personal space no more. "So that's how it is, huh?"

"Yeah." It came out faintly, Gilbert's closeness unexpected. "Yeah," he repeated, more firm this time, "it is."

Gilbert smirked, slipped his hands into his pockets. "Really."

Gilbert was so close to laughing and Matthew could hear it, so it was no surprise when his own lips started to tremble with a smile of his own, even as he crossed his arms at his chest. "*Really*," he said. And then they were laughing again, Matthew hiding his toothy grin behind his hands.

"Nope," Gilbert said, pulling Matthew's hands away from his face and dropping them to his sides. "You know the rules."

And now Gilbert was blushing again because Matthew was too and he was smiling so big that it made his eyes squint and his nose crinkle.

"Well, I'm sure you two wanna catch up," Feliciano said, and it seemed to snap the two out of whatever had taken hold of them. "So we'll leave you to it."

"Oh," Matthew said, and at least he had the wherewithal to look a little embarrassed. "S-Sure."

Gilbert on the other hand, was long gone. "Yeah," he said, not even sparing them a side glance. "We'll catch you guys later."

He watched Gilbert take a step forward, watched Matthew do the same, and Ludwig pulled him along before the nosy part of his boyfriend had the chance to linger any more than it already had. "Did you see that? It's like we were barely there," he giggled.

Ludwig responded with an amused grunt, his features softening as Feliciano leaned into him. "You can't be that surprised."

"Well, no, but, at the same time, I kind of am. I mean, I've never seen them *that* flirty before. That's a good sign, isn't it? That's a really good sign. Don't you think? I think so. I really think our plan is working!" Ludwig just smiled, in the way he always did when Feliciano got excited, when he talked a mile a minute and used his hands a little too much and answered his own questions soon after asking them. He'd always done that, ever since they were little kids, and even then it made Ludwig smile. "Do you think one of them will break?" Feliciano felt Ludwig laugh though he could not hear it, and its suddenness made him look up. Ludwig was smiling down at him, eyes full of amusement, and he flushed.

"Sorry," he laughed as they came up on the long table of hors d'oeuvres. "I'm talking too much, aren't I?" He hummed as he scanned the table. "Oh, here's the fondue fountain!" Feliciano reached out to grab them some skewers. He stopped short as he was pulled back from the table by Ludwig, and he turned around. And before he could ask what was wrong, Ludwig was leaning down to place a kiss on his lips.

It shocked Feliciano, both its suddenness and the fact that Ludwig had done it at all. After all, there were so many people around. Ludwig didn't like to do much more than hold hands when they weren't alone. That was just how Ludwig was, and Feliciano had never tried to push him on it, had never even felt the need to, because he knew how much Ludwig loved him, and Ludwig had no one else he needed to prove that to but Feliciano himself. And yet right now, even with all these people about, his boyfriend was kissing him, deeply at that, as sweet and soft as ever. Feliciano didn't even know what to say when Ludwig pulled away, that same sweetness in his eyes.

"You never talk too much, Feliciano." Ludwig watched his boyfriend's face tine red, but still Feliciano said nothing, still in shock. And honestly, Ludwig was quite surprised at himself too, if his stinging face was any indication. But he regretted nothing, and the smile that came to Feliciano's face cemented that fact. "And to answer your question," he added, a wry smile on his lips, "based on what I saw up there on the terrace, I think it's safe to say Gilbert's already broken."

Feliciano laughed softly, lifted Ludwig's hand to his lips. "You're such a good brother," he said. "And boyfriend."

The way Feliciano looked at him had Ludwig's face burning all over again, and suddenly he was being led into the crisp night air, where they whispered sweet-nothings in cold puffs of smoke, and warmed their hands at the bottom of each other's pockets.

Gilbert's fingertips felt like heated sparks against the back of Matthew's hand, and yes, they were doing this again because the first time had ended too soon. Matthew allowed himself to be pulled in once more, and smiled as his arms wrapped around Gilbert's torso, his cheeks burning hot against the other's shoulder. He laughed when the arms surrounding him squeezed tighter, both from the way it tickled and because of what he heard Gilbert say next.

"God, I missed these."

"Oh," Matthew said as they pulled away from one another, "so you missed my hugs, but not me."

"Nah. Just your arms." He snickered, and if Matthew's ears were wilting leaves, then Gilbert's laughter was water. "Of course I missed you, *dummkopf*."

Matthew laughed again, smile subtle yet noticeably sly. "I'll admit, break was nice, but...there was a little less awesome than I'm used to."

"C'mon, did you expect there not to be without me?"

"Of *course* not."

"I don't like your tone, Matthew." But God, if he didn't love that delicious smirk on his lips.

"That sounds like a personal problem, Gilbert."

He could practically hear the grin stretching across Gilbert's face. "Touché."

Gilbert was holding his hand. It wasn't a grip, nor was it a squeeze, but instead a subtle sensation of skin against skin. And Matthew said nothing. Did nothing to suggest that he objected to the contact. Because he liked the feel of Gilbert's thumb against the palm of his hand. Because he liked the warmth of those fingers against his knuckles. Because he liked it when Gilbert was even more than the vibrations in his ears and the scent on his nose. When Gilbert was tangible.

"You..." Gilbert blushed at the way Matthew tilted his head, as if telling him to go on, that he was listening. "You look amazing."

Matthew's face was painted his favorite color, and suddenly his tongue felt too heavy to move. But somehow he managed. "Thank you..."

"You're...welcome."

There was a slight pause before Matthew spoke again. "Your fragrance..." he said, "it's really nice." His flush deepened once he realized that it was the first time he'd ever said so aloud. "It suits you well," he said. He breathed a mental sigh of relief as Gilbert thanked him. That was *so* much better (and certainly less creepy) than *dear god, you smell really, really good.* And yet even as his heart rate continued to climb, more words were coming out. "Do you mind if I see what you're wearing?"

Matthew's face blurred to the background as Gilbert's eyes came to focus on his friend's outstretched hand, frozen just a few inches from his chest. *Oh.* He shook his head, but then he realized how stupid the action was without words. "*Nein.*"

Gilbert's breaths were unusually slow as Matthew's fingers settled on his person. First the edge of his collar. Then the lapel of his jacket. His neck tie. His breast pocket. His movements were gentle, almost ghostly. And Gilbert pushed back a sudden tremor. Pushed back the urge to tell Matthew that he needn't tread so lightly, that there was nothing about these fingers against him that he didn't like. That he didn't want. The touches were innocent; Gilbert knew this. But he still couldn't help the way his body was reacting. Matthew's lips were moving again, smiling at him.

"You look very handsome."

Gilbert was pretty sure all of the blood that was supposed to be rushing to his heart and brain was currently pooling in his cheeks. If he suddenly fainted he would know why. "Thanks, Mattie." He cleared his throat softly, his hand dropping from Matthew's because sweaty palms were so not awesome. "You been around the place yet?"

"Feli showed me around to most of the main rooms. I still can't believe how huge this place is."

"I know," he laughed. "It's insane."

"I heard someone got lost in here earlier," Matthew said with a smirk. His teasing flew right over Gilbert's head because Gilbert's version of "lost" was pacing around outside while his brother watched. Luckily for Alfred and his accomplices, Gilbert's response was safe enough that it didn't raise any questions.

"Well, a map on some of the walls wouldn't hurt," he joked, giving a light shrug. "Probably won't be as fancy as all these pictures of Victorian chicks."

"Probably not," Matthew giggled.

"He take you up on the terrace?"

Matthew gasped. "There's a terrace?"

"Guess that's a no," Gilbert chuckled. "C'mon." He gently grabbed Matthew's hand to loop his arm around his own. Matthew's cane dangled at his wrist as he clung to Gilbert, the aid happily ignored by the both of them. "So," Gilbert continued, making for the hallway, "I think it's about time you tell me your name."

"Oh. Yeah," Matthew laughed sheepishly.

"What do you mean 'oh yeah?' You think I wasn't gonna ask after you were being such a tease about it?" Gilbert couldn't handle how adorable Matthew looked with his face hidden behind his shoulder.

"Alright, alright." His voice was muffled against Gilbert's jacket. He lifted his head so that his voice would be clear enough. "It's Avy."

"Avy...?"

"...Arie."

Gilbert snorted. "What? Like the big ass bird cages?"

"Yes," he sighed, "like the big ass bird cages." The pout on his lips didn't last very long; Gilbert's laughter was contagious. "Shut up. I've been arrested, you know. Five times."

"Oh yeah? For what?"

"...Trespassing." Another snort.

"Where?"

"On federally protected nature preserves."

Matthew could hear a strained noise come from Gilbert's throat, and he knew it wouldn't be but a few more seconds before Gilbert lost control. He decided to speed it along, bringing his

lips closer to the other's ear and whispering as menacingly as he could, "Don't *mess* with me, Gilbert."

And Gilbert lost it, his cackles echoing straight through the hallway and into the foyer. Between the snorting and gasping Matthew lost it too, and neither of them could walk another step, both doubled over in their mirth. Gilbert sniffled as he steadied himself with a hand against the wall.

"Are you—" Matthew gasped for air, hands on his knees. "Are you crying?"

"Hell yeah I'm crying!" The words still came out wobbly as Gilbert forced them through more residual laughter. "*Gott verdammt*," he groaned and held his stomach, wiping at his eyes. "Alright," he sniffled again. "I'm good."

"Are you sure?" Matthew snickered, standing upright. "Do you need some tissues?"

"Just get over here, smart ass." Gilbert took Matthew's hand and Matthew giggled, steadying himself on Gilbert's arm.

"So, no bad jokes for me then?"

Gilbert gave a lopsided grin. "Nah, I don't think so. That was worth the wait, *Vögelchen*."

Matthew frowned as they began to walk again, raising a brow. His ears had long grown used to Gilbert's tendency to slip into his mother tongue, but that word was definitely a new one. "Foo...what?" His attempt remained unfinished, lest Gilbert tease him for his admittedly atrocious pronunciation. But Gilbert sucked at French, so they were even.

"*Vögelchen*," he repeated. "Means...little bird. Birdie." He smirked and shrugged his shoulders. "You wouldn't give me a name, so I gave you one myself. Cute, right?"

Matthew gave a breathy laugh and it tickled Gilbert's neck, making his ears turning red. "I'd take birdie over bird cage any day."

Gilbert smiled to himself then, because even after Matthew finished his role of Quirky Bird Enthusiast, the name would still stay. Matthew just didn't know it yet. He had no clue about just how long Gilbert had laid in his bed earlier that evening, smiling like an idiot because he couldn't think of anything more perfect to describe the boy he had fallen for. Just like a little bird.

At first a little timid. Skittish and hesitant. But beautiful; best admired from a distance. And one day that little bird appeared right in front of him, simply by chance, and Gilbert was consumed by the urge to get a little closer. And he did. Inching and inching, drawing nearer and nearer, until suddenly, there was no more coaxing to be done. Its little chirps grew louder and livelier, its songs more vibrant. And Gilbert discovered that it was even more beautiful than it was from afar, that it was fragile but not at all helpless, different but not strange, that it liked to be talked to and played with and touched and held. And Gilbert hoped that what he was about to do wouldn't scare it away.

"Gil?"

He quickly looked to the boy on his arm. "Yeah?"

"I was asking what time it was."

Gilbert's face flared. When was that? Just now? He knew love made people dumb, but deaf? "Sorry," he laughed sheepishly, "hold on a sec." He pulled out his phone just enough to peek at the clock. "Ten till ten."

"Wow...that late already?"

"Yeah." Gilbert's voice was softer than usual, that perpetual smirk on his lips. Time was such a bitch. It was almost like it couldn't stand to see Matthew next to him, so it moved twice as fast just to spite him. Twice as slow when Matthew wasn't near. But he didn't care; Matthew was right here, right now, and nothing else mattered. Not even time itself.

"Time flies, huh?" Matthew smiled as memories of three cheese pizza and dog saliva flooded his mind.

"Yeah, well let it," Gilbert replied. "I'm not done with you yet."

Matthew blushed, his smile coy. "Well, good. Because you couldn't get rid of me even if you tried."

"You say that like it's a punishment." Matthew felt his mind go to mush at the sensation of Gilbert's lips just inches away from his ear. "Sounds like a victory to me."

Even if Matthew had been thinking clearly enough to respond, which he most certainly wasn't, he wouldn't have gotten the chance to, because suddenly there was a shrill scream. The sound made the two of them freeze where they stood.

"W-What was that?"

"I...don't know." Gilbert looked to the end of the hall and into the foyer, where people were gathering. "Something's happening in front. Let's go." The other nodded and they quickly headed for the end of the hall. Once in front, Gilbert tsked at how quickly the crowd had grown. Whatever everyone was gathered around, he couldn't see it, but a quick listen to the frantic conversation around him gave him his answer.

"The murder," he said, raising his voice a bit over all the murmuring. "That's what we just heard."

"O-Oh. Right." Matthew sighed with relief. Their host never did say when or how the murder would take place; or that it was going to scare the hell out of him. Matthew winced as someone collided with his shoulder, hard enough to make him stumble.

"Hey, you aren't the only one who wants to look, asshole!" Gilbert sneered as the guy looked over his shoulder, his face blanching before he ducked out of sight. He said a few more choice words before turning his attention back to Matthew. "Are you alright?"

Matthew's face grew hot as Gilbert's finger's slipped between his, and he nodded. "I'm fine, Gil." Those fingers squeezed his hand tighter and he thought his face was going to go numb. Fine was an understatement. "What's everyone trying to look at?"

"Hell if I know," Gilbert grumbled. "Must be important if people don't give a shit about basic manners."

"Hey." Gilbert felt fingertips press against his knuckles. "I said I was fine. Let assholes be assholes."

And his shoulders fell. Because Matthew's hand was warm and soft and in his own. He laughed softly, returning the boy's smile. "That's my kinda motto."

As the crowd began to slowly dissipate, Gilbert finally saw what all the fuss was about. Feliks really went all out. Bright orange traffic cones, yellow caution tape, the shape of a body, outlined in thick white tape. Next to the outline was a soiled kitchen knife. There was something scribbled on the floor in red, presumably the victim's blood. Gilbert squinted as he read it: ROUND TWO. And then he laughed.

"Cute."

"What is it?"

"Crime scene. Cones, tape, murder weapon. Even a little fake blood."

"What was the weapon?"

"A knife. Guess this is the start of the second round."

Matthew's brows raised on his forehead. "That means we have to start deliberating. Where did your invitation say you have to go?"

"The sun room. You?"

"The living room..."

"Oh..."

"I don't wanna see it!"

Both Matthew and Gilbert's heads snapped up. The voice was unmistakable. As was the next.

"Oh, but come on, it's fake, see?"

"Don't care."

Gilbert glanced around, looking past a few heads until he spotted them. Antonio spotted them too.

"Gilbert! Matthew!"

Lovino's eyes were wide as Antonio pulled him along, stunned to see his two friends standing next to each other, hand in hand. But just as quickly as he'd seen it, it was gone, the two looking redder than he thought was humanly possible. So they weren't quite there yet, he thought. That meant he and Toni needed to remain somewhat neutral. Quickly, he yanked his boyfriend down to ear level and whispered.

"Don't say *shit* about *anything.*"

The look that flashed across Antonio's face told Lovino that he'd gotten the memo. Thankfully. He wanted to roll his eyes when Gilbert had the nerve to smirk at him, like *he* was the one who'd just been caught blushing like a third grader asked to check "yes" or "no." The smug bastard.

"You scared of a little fake blood, Lovi Dove?"

"Oh, fuck off, Gilbert." Lovino knew just how far these theater kids could go with a little makeup and props; he didn't wanna see a fucking dead body, fake or not.

"Is that any way to treat the guy you left waiting out in the cold?"

Lovino shrugged. "You survived."

"We got a little distracted by the photo booths." Antonio grinned sheepishly. It wasn't a total lie. "But I see you found Matthew."

"Yeah, with no help from you guys. But I get it," Gilbert said, holding up a hand to delay whatever Lovino had been fixing his mouth to say. "You can't suck faces with me in the middle. Feeling's mutual."

"Shut the hell up."

Matthew laughed and Lovino looked over at him, taken aback by his appearance. It wasn't just what he was wearing, or the extra attention he'd given to his hair. It was his presence. He had noticed it long before tonight of course, his improved posture, the fact that his voice no longer sounded like it'd be carried away by the slightest breeze. Sure, Matthew was a quiet guy, Lovino thought, but there was nothing wrong with that. It was clear that it was just his personality. Unassuming as he was, there was no denying that he had a backbone. Gone was the mousy kid he met in after school detention. Perhaps the Matthew standing in front of him had been in there all along.

"You clean up good, Matt." He gave a curt nod as the blond thanked him, and huffed as he looked to Gilbert. "I guess you look pretty decent too."

Gilbert rolled his eyes fondly. "Yeah, back atcha." He looked between his two childhood friends and smirked. "Nice touch with the matching bowties."

"Right?"

Lovino flushed and grumbled as Antonio stood there grinning like an idiot, pleased as can be. That same smile was the reason why there was an obnoxiously red bow at his neck. He'd

been tricked. With those eyes and that cheesy "*el rojo es el color de las pasiones*" bullshit. And he still fell for it like the romantic piece of shit he was. "Whatever."

"We have to hurry and get to the kitchen before we miss the deliberations," Antonio said, hand settling at the small of his boyfriend's back. "It'll be a little suspicious if we're the last ones to show, don't you think?"

Lovino scoffed. "Only if you think one of us did it."

"You both are in the kitchen?" Gilbert asked.

"Yep, where are you guys?"

"I'm in the living room." Gilbert clenched his jaw as Matthew said it a second time, hands buried in his pockets. Time and Fate were sadists for sure.

"Sun room," he replied, facing the boy at his side. "I'll make sure you get to the living room first."

He nodded, the smile on his lips much too brief for Gilbert's liking.

Antonio looked between the two of them, and then down at Lovino, both sensing the sudden change in atmosphere. "Hopefully it won't take very long," he said, and he really hoped it wouldn't, because Gilbert and Matthew *really, really,* needed to happen. And soon. It was driving him crazy.

"The faster we can get it over with, the faster we can get back to doing our own shit." That was as comforting as Lovino could ever possibly attempt to be.

"Yeah," Gilbert laughed, "guess you're right."

"Feli says we're meeting at the tree for the countdown at eleven, so...be there." Antonio was mildly shocked when Lovino took his hand; PDA was definitely more Antonio's thing. "C'mon, let's hurry up and do this," he said, pulling him along. "Try not to go crazy, Matt."

"See you guys later!" Antonio called over his shoulder.

"Don't miss me too much!" Gilbert called back, snickering when Lovino waved a pretty little bird over his head. His expression slowly fell as his eyes landed back on Matthew, both now facing each other. Gilbert went to speak, but so did Matthew, their voices cutting into each other. They tried again, and failed again, both breaking into laughter.

"You ready?" Gilbert finally asked. Matthew's hand settled on his arm. The foyer was nearly empty, most having left to find their designated rooms.

"Mmhm."

They soon found themselves back in the halls, walking much slower than was necessary. Matthew was fiddling with the fabric of Gilbert's jacket as they talked, trying to ignore the way his stomach was churning. But he couldn't. Because his mind was screaming at him too.

Telling him that the words that were coming from his mouth were wrong, that they were a distraction, that he needed to *quit bullshitting*. And Matthew couldn't ignore it. Because that was exactly what he was doing.

"Gilbert..."

The boy frowned as he was stopped, Matthew's fingers squeezing him just tight enough to have his full attention. He looked at Matthew, whose bottom lip was between his teeth. "What's wrong?" The pressure on his arm let up as Matthew's eyes fell to the floor, and then, back up again.

"Could we just...go up on the terrace anyway?" Gilbert's eyes grew wide. "The murderer's already been decided...Us not showing up to deliberate isn't going to change that." But his smile was wider. "So...I just thought—"

"Yes." Matthew's mouth snapped shut as Gilbert took his hand. "Hell yes. Let's go."

He nodded, breaking into the biggest smile as Gilbert pulled him along, relief flooding throughout his body. "Gil," he laughed, "not so fast! I'll trip and we'll *both* be on the floor!"

"Shit. Sorry," he said, immediately slowing his pace.

"It's ok."

"You just..." Gilbert blushed. "You said exactly what I was thinking."

"...Really?"

"*Wirklich*." Matthew was silent, but those glowing cheeks and that smile told Gilbert everything he needed to know. "I never took you for the bad boy type." Matthew smirked. And *good lord* did Gilbert love it when he did that.

"Maybe not before I met you."

"Are you saying I'm a bad influence?"

"If by 'bad' you mean 'awesome,' then yes."

Gilbert laughed, deep and breathy, and the sound sent a shiver down Matthew's spine.

It was warm in front of the fire. Quiet. Nothing more than the sounds of swaying branches, crackling wood, and the voices of two boys.

"I can't believe you."

"It was an honest mistake! I don't know really how it happened, but our phones are the exact same model so..." Matthew mumbled sheepishly. The couch dipped as Gilbert joined him where he sat, an arm draped comfortably over the back. Matthew flushed, oblivious to the way the pair of eyes on him softened.

"And here I thought you were ignoring me."

His tone was playful, but his words weren't any less true. He'd gotten increasingly nervous when he realized it'd been about a half hour since he sent that last-minute text in the car, thinking that maybe he'd been a little too forward, that maybe he'd put Matthew in an awkward position. That maybe Matthew's feelings didn't run as deeply as his. But from the moment he'd pulled Matthew into his arms that night, every smile, every laugh, every word, every touch—all of it, all of Matthew, had been telling him just how wrong he was.

"No," Matthew chuckled, thumb tracing the abstract patterns sewn into the throw pillow that sat between them. "I don't think I could ever ignore you."

"Oh yeah?" Gilbert leaned in closer, a cheeky grin on his face. "Why? Because I'm just that great, right?"

Matthew gave a soft laugh. "...Because you didn't ignore *me*."

Gilbert froze. Because Matthew was smiling at him so tenderly it hurt.

"Everyone else did, but you didn't."

Gilbert was silent. Rarely was Gilbert ever silent, especially when he didn't have to be. And Matthew had always loved that about him. That he always seemed to have something to say, to him. Something to laugh at, to groan about, to bicker about, with him. But now, he was silent. For the first time since Matthew had met him, it was *Gilbert* who was without words. And Matthew's heart was racing. Because Gilbert hadn't pulled away. Because all of Gilbert's attention was on him. Because he knew Gilbert was listening. And so he swallowed away his fears, knowing that he had already reached the cliff's edge. Now it was just time to take the plunge.

"When you sat down at my desk...I couldn't believe it. And when you introduced yourself, I..." He laughed, barely audible over the crackling fire. "I thought I was dreaming. Because people don't do that to me. Ever. Not unless they have to. So when you came up to me, even though I had no idea who you were, I was so happy. Because you..." Matthew's hands had started to shake. "You didn't treat me like I was some freak."

"Because you *aren't*, Matthew." Gilbert had finally found his voice, and it ripped through his throat almost painfully, as if he couldn't get the words to leave his lips fast enough.

"I know," he said, hands wrung in his lap to keep them steady.

"You aren't," Gilbert repeated, softer, earnest. "And you never were to me."

"Thank you," he whispered.

"Matthew..." He was so close that Matthew could feel his own name run straight through him. "Don't thank me for something like that."

"I wouldn't even be here at this party if it wasn't for you." Matthew pulled back slightly, just so that Gilbert could clearly see his face. See that he meant every single word he was saying.

"I wouldn't have made so many friends. Or even remembered what it feels like to have someone other than my brother or my parents treat me like...like *me*."

"Mattie, I didn't do any of that. *You* did." The extra space that Matthew had put between them was gone. "Do you *know* the effect you have on people? People who think more of you than the fact that you can't see?"

Matthew didn't know how to respond, his lips parting slightly, but nothing coming out. His breath left him as Gilbert leaned in closer, feeling the warmth of his body, even hotter than the flames that burned in front of them. He hadn't realized he'd bowed his head until Gilbert said his name again, whispered it. And Matthew lifted his head to face him, his cheeks burning.

"I love being with you."

Gilbert stared into Matthew's widened eyes, knowing that they weren't actually looking back at him. But he didn't care. It wouldn't stop him from loving that soft shade of blue. From loving how lovely that soft shade of blue looked against those flushed and heated cheeks. "When I walked up to you that day, I wanted to get to know you. Not 'the blind kid.' *You*, Mattie."

Matthew's throat was tight.

"And I love getting to know you. I love knowing that your favorite book is *The Giver*. And that you've read it four times. I love knowing that you like thunderstorms. And chirping crickets. And the way snow crunches under your boots. I love knowing that you hate it when people drag their feet when they walk. And click their pens in class." He smirked. "And when you forget to peel the stickers off of fruit before you eat it."

Matthew laughed. Or at least he'd intended to. Instead it came out as more of a sob, the sound, and the tears that followed, shocking the both of them. "Sorry," he said hurriedly, wiping at his face, laughing again because he couldn't believe that he was crying. "I'm just so glad I met you."

And Gilbert couldn't stand it anymore. Being so close to Matthew and yet not close enough. And he closed the dreaded gap without another thought more, pulling Matthew into his arms, squeezing him tight until he heard that little giggle, muffled against his chest. Matthew breathed him in, every muscle melting into Gilbert's touch, sighing as he heard the boy he clung to reply, "*Ich auch.*"

As the two pulled away, neither did so completely, their palms connecting, fingers intertwining, faces mere inches apart. Matthew could feel the heat of Gilbert's breath against his cheeks, the tips of their noses just barely touching. And that was when he heard it, felt it, whispered against his lips.

"If I asked to date you...what would you say?"

Matthew was shaking, his hand clamped around a fist full of Gilbert's jacket. "Yes," he breathed.

Not even a second after the word had left his mouth were Gilbert's lips against his, soft, warm, smiling, Matthew's fingers trembling against his cheek. Hot tears slipped past his lashes as that hand around his gripped him even tighter, as the lips against his pulled him in deeper, brought him closer to the boy who'd *seen* him.

Who'd seen *him*, the elephant, and refused to look away.

Chapter End Notes

Thank you so much for having taken interest in this story. I appreciate each and every one of you who've followed along thus far, long-time readers and new. I think I had way too much fun with all the cheesy mystery identities lmao.

Before you go, please take a look at this wonderful fanart drawn by one of my lovely readers! I absolutely adore it and wanted to share it with you all :) Thanks so much, Liett!

The Magic Word

Chapter Summary

> The two boys wandered without a map to guide them, a little anxious, but no less eager for the journey ahead.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

⠠⠓⠥⠗⠗⠽ ⠠⠓⠥⠗⠗⠽ ⠓⠥⠗⠗⠽

The sun was beginning to sink from overhead, its slow but steady descent staining the sky a soft orange. It wouldn't be but a half hour or so before it slipped beneath the horizon, and Arthur found himself getting worried, eyes peering out to scan the front driveway.

As if the weather wasn't already cold enough, temperatures dropped dramatically in the evening, often freezing over whatever flurries had covered the roads during the day. If the Englishman remembered correctly, the weather report he'd half listened to earlier that morning warned of temperatures reaching well below zero once night fell. He really hoped they would arrive soon. And safely.

He jumped a bit at the soft click of his electric kettle shutting off, the sound of boiling water reaching his ears. Arthur stared at the small appliance, and then at the empty mug that sat beside it, his mind still a bit distant. He *had* been making tea, hadn't he? To calm himself down, yes, that was it. He sighed as he plopped a tea bag inside, the water turning a rich brown as he began to fill his mug. The scent alone was enough to rid him of his stiff shoulders.

How ridiculous he was, a forty-five year old man fussing over something so simple. He sipped from his mug, sighing once more as he leaned against the countertop. Except it wasn't so simple. Not for Arthur, anyway. It was *he* who had been the one to suggest it and yet, it was still bloody nerve wracking. He sat down his mug on the counter and returned to the window, eyes again fixated on the driveway.

"Now, Arthur, do you really want to be caught doing that when they arrive?"

Arthur's fingers slipped from the blinds, the man whipping around to find his husband smirking at him, stealing a few sips from the mug he'd left behind.

"What are you talking about?" he huffed, arms crossed at his chest.

"Nothing says a good first impression like seeing your boyfriend's father staring out at you through the window."

Arthur flushed, sending a glare the Frenchman's way. "Shut up, frog."

Francis chuckled, waving Arthur over to the stove. "Come and taste this for me, will you?"

Arthur rose a brow. "Is it not your lamb stew? You've made it plenty of times."

"Yes, but I've prepared the broth a bit differently this time around," he replied, stirring the stew as it continued to simmer. "I want your opinion first."

"Well, alright." Arthur smirked as he walked over. "I seem to recall you saying my English tastebuds were doomed since birth. And yet you want my opinion, hm?"

"Nevermind that," he said waving a hand. "I've trained your palate in the ways of my country's cuisine. I trust your invaluable judgement."

Arthur tsked and grumbled as Francis brought the wooden spoon to his lips, taking a sample despite himself. A hum of pleasure left Arthur almost immediately, and the sound alone was the only feedback Francis needed.

"My god, Francis, that's wonderful." Francis smiled and brought an arm around the other's waist as he lidded the pot.

"Just a different brand of wine. In celebration of our guest."

The Brit laughed softly. "Spoiling the boy before you've even met him."

"Oh, but I've met him."

Arthur scoffed, bringing a fist to the Frenchman's chest. "You know what I mean." He pouted at the other's smug smile. "Braggart."

Francis pulled him in closer, pecking his cheek in apology. "It certainly will be much different to actually meet him in person."

"Obviously…" Arthur mumbled, playing with the buttons on his husband's shirt. "Though I'm still a bit envious that you've already gotten a chance to speak with him. Even if only through a computer."

"Are you really so anxious?"

Arthur sighed. "Matthew's *dating* now, Francis. How can I not be?"

It had come out the morning of the new year, the discovery that Matthew was now dating, starting with Arthur casually asking how the boys had enjoyed their little party. The way Matthew's face had flushed was a dead giveaway. It hadn't taken long for breakfast to turn into a game of 20 Questions, he and Francis prodding for details while Alfred snickered about them being "a year late." Arthur had insisted Matthew invite Gilbert over for a proper meeting, and Matthew promised to ask Gilbert when he would be free. And so here they were on a Friday evening, waiting to meet the boyfriend.

“You weren’t this worked up about Alfred’s boyfriend.” Arthur’s face immediately scrunched up into a grimace, face turning pink.

“That's completely different. We didn’t even know they were together until—”

He was cut off by Francis' hearty laughter.

“Shut *up*.”

Arthur didn’t want to relive it. Walking into his son’s room one morning to find him lying beside another boy, both shirtless, their locked lips breaking apart abruptly as he opened the door. He supposed it was what he got for not waiting for an answer after he’d knocked. And not only that, he *knew* the other boy. It was Ivan, the towering boy on Alfred's wrestling team.

Alfred had briefly introduced Ivan to he and Francis after one of their meets last year. It had been a huge win for their team and Alfred, flying high on the victory, had dragged Ivan across the parking lot to meet them. Arthur could still remember how taken aback he was by his calm and polite demeanor, seemingly mismatched with the intimidating strength and tenaciousness he displayed in sport. *"Dude's a beast, isn't he?"* Arthur remembered Alfred saying, pure admiration in his eyes as he slapped at his teammates' back. Ivan's face had been flushed and Arthur had thought it was from the exertion of the night, but looking back, Arthur should have known there was something more there. Francis had had no idea either though, which made Arthur feel a bit better.

It became a regular occurrence, chatting briefly with Ivan after meets, congratulating him on his wins and remarking at his skill. And every time they did so, Alfred would get that same look in his eyes while Ivan colored at the attention. Yes, looking back it was a wonder that they hadn't had even the slightest inkling. Maybe it was because Alfred had never shown an interest in dating. Or because the closeness between two teammates was nothing out of the ordinary. But even Francis had said it to him, full of amusement at having been left in the dark: looking back, it was right there in their faces.

The moment Arthur's brain had registered that the boy in Alfred's bed was Ivan, he found his voice. Slowly, calmly, and somewhat numbly he’d said that breakfast was ready, and that Ivan was welcome to join them, before gently closing the door. Oh, the way he'd hurried downstairs to catch Francis up to speed. How he'd glared at Francis as he laughed and laughed and took out an extra plate for their guest. It was a whirlwind of a morning indeed.

Eventually Alfred had come down that morning, along with Ivan, who he unflinchingly announced he was dating. He'd apologized, revealing that he'd brought Ivan inside late last night with the intention to grab a few things and drive him home. But they were both exhausted and Alfred convinced him to stay the night. Ivan had apologized too, said he would go, but he and Francis shut that down quickly, welcoming him with open arms. In all of the confusion, Arthur had been grateful for both of their honesty, even though it was clear that they were embarrassed. Perhaps more shocking for Arthur was the fact that it appeared that his other son already knew what they hadn't, and that made it all the more important for them to spend that morning catching up on what they'd missed.

Although Arthur would have preferred he could erase the shock of that morning from his memory altogether, Ivan had been exceedingly polite and charming, and most of all, the two seemed smitten with each other. So, all things considered, the impromptu Meet the Boyfriend breakfast had been much less awkward than it could have been. Perhaps that boded well for the dinner they would have tonight.

“Anyway, Alfred is different,” Arthur continued. “I don’t fuss over him the way I do Matthew. You know that.”

“*Oui, je sais*...” Francis moved Arthur’s bangs slightly away from his brows, watching them crease and worry. “I’m just as guilty as you are.”

“And yet you’re still so calm.” His tone was somewhat skeptical.

“Because I’ve seen the way he makes Matthew smile. You’ve seen it too. Even without having met him.”

“Well...yes. Yes, you’re right,” Arthur said, a smile coming to his face.

“I’m sure he’s much more anxious than you’ll ever be.”

“As he should be.” Arthur smirked. “He has not one, but *two* fathers he needs to impress tonight.”

“As long as you aren’t stalking out by the window,” Francis teased. “We don’t want to scare him away before we’ve even opened the door.”

Arthur slapped his husband’s shoulder half-heartedly as he leaned down for a kiss, the Englishman laughing against his lips.

Matthew’s sides were on fire. He could feel tears pricking in his eyes, and no matter how much he begged and pleaded for mercy, it became ever more apparent that the torture was far from over.

And then Gilbert’s voice cracked.

Matthew’s sides were aching. For no other reason than the fact that Gilbert couldn’t sing worth a damn.

Gilbert couldn’t stop the tingling sensation that crept along his face as he watched the boy in the passenger seat throw his head back, eyes squeezed shut as his laughter filled the small space between them. He loved it when Matthew laughed like that. To the point where speaking was impossible. To the point where his face reddened, and his nose went all cute and crinkly. He silently thanked the band playing on the radio for the high notes his shitty vocals would never reach.

“You just gonna laugh in my face while I serenade you?” He smirked when he was answered with another snort. “Fine then. Let me help you out.”

Matthew gasped, curling in on himself as he felt Gilbert's fingers wriggle against his stomach. “Gil! No, stop!”

“Hm? Stop what?”

The smile on his lips was almost predatory, his wide grin going crooked as Matthew tried to turn away towards the window. It didn’t take long at all for Matthew to realize that he’d made a terrible mistake, Gilbert’s arm snaking between the door and his seat to lock him in position. A terrible, terrible mistake.

“Please!” he managed to wheeze out. “I can’t breathe!”

“Oh yeah? You sound fine to me.”

And before either of them could comprehend it, Matthew’s elbow made contact with Gilbert’s stomach.

Gilbert’s groaning quickly put an end to Matthew’s laughing fit. “Sorry! I didn’t mean to—”

He reached out without thinking, a frantic hand landing gently on the other’s knee.

Thigh.

That was definitely Gilbert’s thigh.

Matthew quickly pulled away and mumbled another apology, shoving his hands in his lap. He might have shoved his face there too if not for fear of embarrassing himself any further.

“Are you okay?”

“Yeah,” he said, caught between a cough and a laugh. “Wanna warn me the next time you go in for the kill?”

“I told you to stop,” he huffed, a lengthy sigh leaving him as he felt the other retreat to his side of the car. He laughed softly through the soreness in his stomach and sat back in his seat, a smirk pulling at his lips. “Serves you right.”

“*Ja, ja.*” Gilbert grabbed one of the cups that sat between them, not realizing how thirsty he was until he saw Matthew reach for his own drink. “S’not my fault your laugh’s so fucking cute.”

Matthew’s lips curled around the straw in his mouth, eyes shifting coyly towards the floor. He could feel his face growing warmer, and the hot chocolate running down his throat, while delicious, certainly wasn’t doing him any favors. The warmth spreading in his cheeks seemed to echo the fluttering in his stomach, the same way it did when Gilbert’s lips brushed against his, when Gilbert’s fingers curled around his, when Gilbert reminded him that Matthew was...his.

Boyfriend.

It was as if the word ceased to be real the moment Matthew realized it applied to himself. After he realized it applied to his best friend, to his crush, to the boy who'd made him feel things he'd never experienced before.

It had sounded even stranger coming from his parents' mouths, from his brother's, from his friends'...perhaps because it had yet to leave his own. Matthew couldn't even count the number of times the word ran through his mind each day, how many times he'd smile at the mere thought that what he once thought was impossible was not only possible, but now his reality. And yet he still hadn't fixed his lips to say it, as if him doing so would break the spell he was currently under.

It had been just over a week since that night out on the terrace. The feel of Gilbert's lips was still fresh in his mind, in front of the warmth of the fire pit, underneath the towering Christmas tree, feeling Gilbert smile against him, and squeeze him in that moment when the old year became new. If there was ever a time to use the word "bliss," it was during that night, when Matthew could feel his own love reflected in Gilbert's every touch.

Matthew licked the taste of chocolate from his lips, wishing to replace it with that of the boy next to him. He brought his bottom lip between his teeth, fiddling with his straw. He couldn't shove thoughts like these to the back of his mind anymore. And if he were honest with himself, he didn't want to. He wanted to take that image running through his mind—the one where he took Gilbert by the sleeve, and pulled him in, and brought his lips to Gilbert's own—he wanted take it and make it real. But...did Gilbert feel the same?

"Hey, *Vögelchen*…"

Gilbert's voice was soft, but Matthew still found himself startled, being pulled so suddenly from his private thoughts. A flush rose to his cheeks as he registered the German word. It seemed Gilbert was rather fond of the silly alias he'd created. Matthew would have been lying if he'd said it wasn't growing on him too.

"Hm?"

"I wanna take you on a date."

Matthew smiled, setting down his drink. "You say that like we aren't on one right now."

"What?" Gilbert shot up in his seat, heat rising to his face. "Mattie, sitting in my car parked at the back of Dunkin' Donuts isn't a date!"

"Well, why not?" Matthew chuckled as he messed with the radio, flipping to another station to bypass the advertisements.

"Mattie, I mean a *real* date. Where I, you know, *take* you somewhere! This was just...we had some free time after school before dinner with your folks, so I—" Gilbert frowned as he looked at Matthew, whose smile had become an expression of mild confusion. He reached out for the dial that sat between them, turning down the radio before he spoke again. "Did you really think I'd allow our first date to be in a shitty old parking lot? What kind of shit boyfriend would I be if I did that?"

Matthew stilled. It was the first time he'd heard it from Gilbert's lips. And for the first time, it sounded *right*.

"Gil," he said after a pause, "maybe this isn't our official first date. But still, I don't care where it is, or even what we do. It doesn't have to be anything fancy." He played with frayed edges of his scarf, stomach churning as he spoke again. "All I really care about is being able to spend time with you."

Gilbert's eyes widened as he looked at Matthew there sitting next to him, smiling at him like that, with that deep red against his cheeks. And he wondered how on earth he'd managed to restrain himself for as long as he had, wondered how he'd gotten through the week with mere embraces and hand holding and forehead pecks. He wanted to feel those pretty lips moving along his, just like before. More than anything.

Just as Matthew thought he might have come on a bit too strong, he felt Gilbert's hand taking his, pulling anxious fingers away from the scarf at his neck. He allowed himself to be pulled in as he found his breaths growing shallow, his eyes slowly closing as the heat of Gilbert's body grew nearer, both stalling in the middle.

Gilbert waited for any type of resistance, for any sign that he should stop right then and there, but it never came. Matthew placed a hand on the other's shoulder, pulling him even closer, fingers gripping tight once he felt Gilbert's lips press against his.

Gilbert's lips were soft. Matthew couldn't help sighing against them, leaning in to the kiss as one of Gilbert's hands came to rest at his waist. *God*, how badly Matthew had wanted to experience this again. To be touched like this again, his anxiety and inexperience be damned. Even as their mouths broke apart, both knew that neither was ready for this to end, and so they lingered, mouths mere inches apart, hovering, hesitating, until again the little space between them was erased.

It wasn't as smooth the second time around, an awkward clashing of teeth as the two rushed to meet one another. Gilbert smiled when Matthew let out a sheepish laugh, tilting Matthew's head upwards as they began again. Slowly, they formed a rhythm, lips parting and reuniting at a steady pace, Matthew's hand falling from Gilbert's shoulder to his chest. Little subtlety remained once Gilbert took the lead, and Matthew gave a small gasp as the other's tongue swept along his lip.

Before he could even fathom that it was happening, Gilbert's tongue was in his mouth, sliding against his. It sent tremors running down his back, every muscle in his body tensing as his brain tried to register the new sensation. But just as fast as he'd felt it, it was gone, as were Gilbert's lips. Matthew's eyes opened at the sudden loss of contact, mouth still slightly ajar.

"Sor—"

"No." Gilbert's breath hitched as the hand on his chest balled into a fist, gently pulling him back in. He could smell the faint scent of chocolate on Matthew's breath as it left his moistened lips, and he gave an involuntary gulp when Matthew whispered again. "I'm fine."

Again, Gilbert brought the blond's lips to his, planting one soft kiss after another until he felt the fingers gripping at his jacket go slack. Matthew was prepared when Gilbert prodded again, lips readily parting. The heat of his breath, the firm pressure of his lips, the two alone were enough to leave Matthew tingling from head to toe. But now to feel this new part of him, wet, warm, slick, *eager*...he could find no shame in something that felt so good.

The soft noises leaving Matthew's throat fed the pulsating between Gilbert's legs, his jeans growing uncomfortably tight with Matthew's tongue writhing against his own. He hadn't anticipated the sound of his own pleasure being coaxed from him, Matthew's fingers running up the nape of his neck, nails trailing along his scalp. Matthew shuddered just as Gilbert had, overwhelmed with the fact that he'd caused such a strong reaction.

As the two of them pulled back for air, still they kept close, panting softly. Matthew's hand slowly left Gilbert's hair, only to be taken by him once more, his fingers slipping into the grooves he'd become so fond of.

"I—" Matthew stopped himself, embarrassed both by how breathless he sounded and because of what he was about to say. Gilbert's thumb running along the palm of his hand prompted him to continue. "I've never done that before…"

"The making out or the tongue?"

Matthew ducked his head, sticking his face in the crook between Gilbert's neck and shoulder. "Any of it," he said, voice muffled. He could feel Gilbert shake with amusement.

"Makes two of us then."

Matthew pulled away, brows raising on his forehead. "...Really?"

"Yeah." Gilbert smirked. "Comes with virgin territory."

Matthew's lips parted in awe, mind reeling over the fact that Gilbert had so casually announced his own sexual inexperience. Of all the things he'd expected to learn about Gilbert, that definitely hadn't been one of them, what with how seemingly easy it was for him to talk about anything and everything remotely sexual. Sometimes to the point of making Matthew's lower half do things he wasn't particularly proud of.

"But you…" Matthew's eyes scurried to the floor, lashes exceedingly light against his ruddy cheeks. "You're always…" He was cut off by the other's soft laughter.

"I talk big, but I haven't done anything," he said with a shrug. "Lutz acts like such a prude, but if you knew the things he's done with Feli, you'd think I'm a fucking nun." Matthew stifled a snort behind his hand. "Besides a shitty first kiss in sixth grade, my experience is pretty much nonexistent." Gilbert paused, grinning before he added as an afterthought, "But I'm pretty good at getting the job done myself."

"Oh my god, *Gilbert*," Matthew groaned, shooing away wonderfully filthy thoughts while Gilbert snickered, bringing his arms around either side of him. He smiled despite himself, just elated that Gilbert had yet to let him go.

“What I’m trying to say is, there’s no shame in it. Being inexperienced. This is all really new for me, too. Having a really cute boyfriend, kissing my really cute boyfriend, it’s really awesome and I...” he trailed off, feeling his ears grow hot. “I’m still trying to get used to this.”

Matthew nodded, relief flooding his body at the realization that he wasn’t alone. That Gilbert too was wandering without a map to guide him, a little anxious, but no less eager for the journey ahead.

“Me too,” he admitted. “Sometimes I still can’t believe it. That I have a boyfriend.” He licked his lips, the magic word seeming to tingle as it left his tongue for the first time. “And that he’s...*you*.”

“Damn right he’s me.” Matthew grinned as Gilbert squeezed him.

“Gil?”

“Mm?”

“I like it when you kiss me.”

Matthew had always relied on his words and his actions to express himself in ways his eyes couldn’t, but as he sat there in Gilbert’s car, shielded from the bitter cold, wrapped in more warmth and affection than he could ever ask for, it was perhaps the first time he’d done so without hesitation.

“Please, do it more often.”

It was so unusually blunt for Matthew that Gilbert sat there for a moment, taken aback.

“Actually,” he continued, figuring he should get it all out while he still had the courage.

Besides, he’d just had Gilbert’s tongue in his mouth; what really did he have to be embarrassed about at this point?

“I’ve been wanting to kiss you all week. But I was scared I might miss and kiss your nose instead,” he said with a sheepish laugh. “And I didn’t really know how I should ask you without sounding strange…”

Gilbert could’ve just about died from how adorable Matthew looked while he sat there between his arms, rambling. “Mattie.”

“Yes?”

“Repeat after me.” He smiled as Matthew gave the slightest frown. “Kiss me.”

Matthew’s flush grew darker, a look of realization gracing his features. And he gave a shy whisper. “...Kiss me.”

And just like that Gilbert's lips were against his. As Gilbert pulled away, Matthew mumbled, "You don't need my permission."

"Oh yeah?" Gilbert chuckled, to which Matthew nodded his head. "So," he said, leaning in again, "you mean I could just…" Matthew made an appreciative noise as Gilbert kissed him again, firmer, longer than the one before it, whispering against him as he pulled away, "Like that?"

"Yes," he sighed, not knowing what the helpless sound did to the boy holding him.

"And who says I have a problem with nose kisses?" Matthew laughed as Gilbert pecked the very tip of his nose. "You could kiss me on the eye and I'd be happy as shit."

"Well, I don't *want* to kiss you on your eye," he replied, bringing a hand cautiously to the side of Gilbert's face, running his fingertips along his cheek, his jaw, his chin, thumb brushing across his lips before he leaned forward, feeling the telltale twitch of Gilbert smiling against him.

"Bullseye."

His eyes softened as Matthew laughed aloud, a sound he knew he would never tire of.

"What time is it?"

Gilbert pulled away to glance at the radio display. "It's...five twenty-three." He stared at the bright green numbers for a moment longer, his eyes widening. "*Shit*. It's nearly half past. We need to get going."

Matthew smiled as Gilbert let him go, and buckled his seatbelt while Gilbert grabbed his keys. He heard a deep sigh just as the keys slipped into the ignition, and reached out without another thought. "Ready?"

Gilbert looked down at the gear shift, where Matthew's hand sat atop his, and back up at that smiling face he adored. With Matthew's request still fresh in his mind, he leaned over, savoring every second spent with the taste of chocolate on his tongue. He grinned as he pulled away.

"Ready."

Chapter End Notes

> Teenagers. So awkward and goofy and irrationally anxious, but no less adorable. I really wanted to highlight that with the second half of this chapter, especially in regards to Gilbert's character, as it's common to see him written as some kind of utterly irresistible, knows-all-the-smooth-moves-to-make-your-panties-drop Sexpert™.

When really, he's just a fucking dork. ┐(￣ω￣)┌

Thanks so much for stopping by for another chapter! This is for anyone who wanted to know what song Gilbert was butchering. :)

Sworn

Chapter Summary

Gilbert meets Matthew's family, and begins to wonder what has happened to his own.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

⠠⠭⠒⠒⠭⠄

Matthew’s hand was the only thing keeping Gilbert’s heart from tearing straight through his chest. It was warm, and it fit so perfectly in his, Matthew’s fingers pressed gently to his palm. The soft caress of heated skin. These fingers linked with his. They were the only thing he was familiar with, and Gilbert indulged himself in these last few moments of intimacy, before the greetings and formalities.

Before he said or did something stupid.

A pale thumb found its way across the back of the other boy’s hand, tracing veins, brushing past knuckles as the two stalked quietly up the driveway. Gilbert just barely caught his own reflection in the window as they passed his car, running a fussy hand through his hair for a fourth time, as if the last three times hadn’t been enough. As if a single strand out of place would be the difference between rejection or adoration. Gilbert just couldn’t help himself. He didn’t know what he would do if the night ended with Matthew’s parents despising him.

“Gilbert,” Matthew snickered, squirming slightly in the other’s hold. “That tickles.”

“Oh,” he laughed, “sorry.” Matthew simply shook his head with no need for the apology, smiling softly to himself.

“Thank you.”

Gilbert frowned. “Hm?” The porch light blinked on suddenly, sensing the boys’ footsteps as they drew nearer. “For what?” he asked as Matthew stopped.

“For coming to dinner,” he replied. “We haven’t been dating for very long at all and so...I know it’s a lot to ask.”

“Stop that,” Gilbert said, a smirk playing at his lips. “Like I didn’t already know your folks’d be dying to meet me. I mean, I’m really as good as it gets, can you blame ‘em?”

“Hope you brought a nice pen,” Matthew teased. “They’re gonna want autographs before you go.”

“Yeah, I guess I can do that.” Gilbert shrugged, breaking out into a grin. “It’s lucky they’ve got such a cute son. I’m not usually this generous.”

A pair of moths danced beneath the glow of the light above their heads as the two broke into laughter, the sounds fading away with the last remnants of the sinking sun.

“But seriously,” Gilbert spoke again, his tone more sober, “you say that like this is some kind of inconvenience to me. It’s not. Shit, I feel *honored* to be meeting the two people that brought you to me.”

Gilbert laughed quietly to himself as he watched Matthew go pink under the darkening sky, his own cheeks painted in a shade to match. Listening to himself talk to Matthew was a constant reminder of his own hypocrisy. All of the shit he’d given his little brother and yet here he was, saying things so sickeningly sweet he could feel the words rotting his teeth as they left his mouth.

But he *loved* it, the way these words tasted on his tongue, loved seeing what they did to the boy in front of him. He loved that they came so effortlessly, so shamelessly, so unlike before when the fear of rejection clawed at the back of his mind. He loved that smile on Matthew’s lips, and loved it even more knowing that it was for him and him alone.

Matthew made as if to speak, but stopped himself, teeth pressing against his bottom lip before he said, “Is there anyone at the window?”

Gilbert looked over his shoulder, eyes finding each of the four windows visible from the front of the house. His gaze went from top floor to bottom, noticing the blinds were closed. He inadvertently gulped.

“No?” he answered warily, turning back around.

“Thank God.”

It was so quiet Gilbert had nearly missed it.

He gasped audibly as Matthew’s fingers brushed the nape of his neck, and the distance between them was closed in an instant, Matthew’s lips pressed firmly against his. He could smell and taste Matthew’s mint flavored chapstick as he closed his eyes, shoulders sinking. It stopped the anxious churning in Gilbert’s stomach. But now the hammering in his chest was back. He stared at Matthew’s face when the other’s lips left his, dazed by that smile and those lovely pink cheeks. Matthew had just…

“Sometimes,” he said softly, “I wanna leave you speechless too.”

Gilbert blinked a few times, feeling that tingly warmth spread down his neck and along his ears. His face was burning, and it felt as if the snow under his shoes would surely melt where he stood.

“That’s...one way to do it.”

“Let’s go,” Matthew laughed, taking hold of Gilbert’s hand as he made for the front door.

Matthew could have been leading him into the gates of Hell and still Gilbert gladly would have followed.

Arthur gasped as he heard the front door open, the knife in his hand falling from his grip. As if the sound hadn't startled him enough already, Alfred being right behind him to catch it was the cherry on top.

"Woah," Alfred said, fingers curling around the knife just before it hit the floor. "Lucky this is a butter knife or else I'd be screwed."

"Alfred," Arthur sighed, taking in his son's goofy grin as he handed it over. "Thank you."

"Dad?" Arthur visibly stiffened as Matthew's voice carried from down the hall. "Papa?"

"Where's your father?" Arthur asked as he looked to Alfred with urgency.

Alfred shrugged. "Last I saw him he was in the study looking for a tube of 'Deepest Azure.'" He made sure to draw out the last two words as he mimicked his father's accent, his voice exaggerated and soft.

"They're here and he's decided to start *painting*?" Arthur put a hand to his face, exasperated.

"Dad, *relax*," Alfred said, leaning back onto the counter. "What are you all worked up about a high school kid for?"

"I'm relaxed," he replied, crossing his arms.

"Whatever you say, Dad."

"Don't get cheeky with me," he said, though the words held no real bite. "And why are you still here? You were supposed to be gone before-"

"Yeah, yeah, I got it. I just came for one of these babies before I go," he said, snagging a brownie from the pan Arthur had just been tending to. There was no way he was leaving without a bite of the masterpiece that was his Pop's homemade brownies. Triple. Chocolate. *Fudge*. It was the stuff of gods. Like literally everything else his Pop made.

"Save me some, please?" he asked, voice muffled with a mouth full of fudge that made Arthur chuckle despite himself.

"Yes, yes, fine. And here." Alfred watched his father place another brownie in a small sandwich bag. "For Ivan," he said, placing it in Alfred's jacket pocket. He smirked as his son's eyes widened a bit. "As if I wouldn't know who you decided to pass the time with."

"Yeah...thanks," he replied, a flush growing along his cheeks. "Scare the shit outta Gilbert for me, mkay?"

And before Arthur could scold his son for his language, Alfred was already down the hall.

"Dad?" Matthew called again, hearing distant footsteps coming their way, footsteps that had Gilbert standing stiff as a board. That is until the German was met with a familiar face.

"Nope," Alfred popped the 'p' as he answered. "Guess again, little bro."

Had he not been so surprised Matthew would have rolled his eyes. He was literally only younger by two minutes. "Alfred?"

"Well, if it isn't Mr. Awesome himself," he said, a wide grin on his face. "You ready for your interrogation?"

Gilbert simply smirked. "Was that supposed to be funny?"

"Sure was for me, the one not about to be skewered alive."

"Al, leave him alone. Why are you still here, anyway?"

This was *exactly* the reason why Matthew hadn't wanted Alfred in the house tonight, let alone at the dinner table. Just because Alfred's Meet-the-Guy-I'm-Dating Dinner—no, Breakfast—had been awkward as hell didn't give him the right to make he and Gilbert's moment anymore difficult than it had to be.

"Hey! Ow!" Alfred grumbled as his brother grabbed hold of his arm, pushing him towards the front door. Sometimes Alfred forgot how strong Matthew could be when he wanted to. That gentle face of his could fool just about anyone.

"Get out. Go neck with Ivan or whatever else you guys can manage in an hour."

"I live here too, you know."

"Alfred!"

"Alright, sheesh, I'm going, I'm going! Have fun on the chopping block, Gil." Matthew sighed as Alfred quickly shut the door, his laughter ringing in his ears.

"Idiot," he spat under his breath. "Sorry about him."

"It's fine," Gilbert said, grinning. "I'll be the one laughing when he finds out your parents actually adore me."

"Oh, do we now?"

Gilbert stiffened, and at that very moment he swore he could feel his soul trying to leave his body. Slowly he turned around, coming face to face with the man who had once introduced himself as "Matthew's Papa." The man wore fitted jeans and a black turtle neck, his long hair resting in a loose ponytail at his shoulder. His hands rested in his pockets, a relaxed air about him that somehow made Gilbert even more nervous. They made eye contact, and Gilbert willed himself not to jump.

"Papa," Matthew said, his face lighting up as his boyfriend's drained of color. "*Didn't you hear me calling you?*"

"*I'm sorry, I was in the middle of a quick wardrobe change when you called. Had a tiny accident with my watercolors.*"

"Oh." Matthew smiled as Francis passed an affectionate hand through his hair. "*Where's Dad?*"

"*He's just finishing up in the kitchen. He'll be out soon,*" Francis said, knowing his husband couldn't hide in the kitchen forever.

Gilbert's mouth was getting drier as he listened to the two of them speak. They weren't speaking English, and the little French that Matthew had taught him was vanishing entirely from his memory. Was he expected to understand them? Was Matthew's father expecting him to join in? Was...was he being *tested* right now?

"Papa, this is Gilbert."

Oh thank God, Gilbert thought. Although he couldn't deny that Matthew speaking French did *things* to him, Gilbert was relieved to hear him speaking English again, and suddenly he no longer felt like he'd been thrown into the lion's den. His relief was snatched straight away as those cool blue eyes met his again.

The boy was even more striking in person, Francis noted; computer pixels really did him no justice. He appeared to be right around Matthew's height, perhaps a bit taller if he squinted. It was as if his eyes demanded all of his attention, a loud and angry red that screamed against his light skin and hair. A shade lighter and Francis was sure his lashes would appear to vanish into his skin. His face was more angled than his son's, with a sharper jaw and a taller nose, not cute and button-like as was his Matthieu's. His features were distinctive, but also fitting, working together to complement one another. His son had obviously inherited his good sense for all things beautiful.

"Yes, the famous Gilbert," he said, a warm smile on his lips. "The one your father and I already adore, *hein*? Matthieu neglected to tell me that you were a fortune teller."

Matthew giggled, the sweet sound softening the blow of his own fuck up. And the only way he could recover from the blow, he'd decided, was to use it to his advantage. And so he did. Goosebumps and all.

"No, sir, I'm not," he laughed, in that cute, sheepish way that Matthew couldn't get enough of. "But I really care about your son, and if I can't show you that tonight, then I obviously don't deserve to be dating him. That much I'm sure of."

Francis' brows inched up his face, having not expected such strong words to come from the visibly frazzled young man. Despite his darkened cheeks, his voice was steady, and he stood tall, holding Francis' gaze. Francis could see that even Matthew had been startled, eyes just the slightest bit wider than before. And before Francis knew it, he was smiling again.

"Well now, I think we can agree upon that." He offered up his hand. "I'm delighted to finally be meeting you in person, Gilbert."

"I am too, Mr. Bonnefoy," Gilbert replied and promptly shook the other's hand, unaware of how much he'd surprised the Frenchman by not butchering his last name. "Thank you for having me."

It really was quite a treat, to not have his ears accosted by bastardizations like "Bah-neh-foy," or "Bah-nee-foy," or, God forbid, "Boney-foy." (Bohn-fwah! *Ça, alors*, was it really so difficult?) But the boy wouldn't be winning him over that easily. He *was* dating his son after all; it would've been more of a shock if he *hadn't* said it properly. Still, he awarded Gilbert a few points for his strong handshake, reserving further judgement for the rest of the night.

As Gilbert retracted his hand, he noticed another man approaching, obviously Matthew's other father, clad in a nice sweater vest and corduroys. He wore a rather stern expression as he slipped his glasses from the bridge of his nose and placed them inside the collar of his shirt, his movements polished and precise. When the man's eyes shifted in his direction, Gilbert found himself no more anxious than he already was, oddly enough. He was past the point of dipping a toe into the pool; he'd just cannon balled, in fact. Now he just needed to tread water.

"Dad, you're late," Matthew teased.

"I know, love, I apologize," he said, features softening. "I was just making sure everything was still in order."

"And by that I hope you don't mean you were 'sprucing up' tonight's meal," Francis said with a smirk. He and Matthew shared a laugh while the Englishman scowled, and Gilbert deduced that it was some kind of inside joke.

"Hilarious," Arthur drawled.

"This is Gilbert," Matthew said, purely for the sake of formality. "Gilbert, my dad."

This time Gilbert was first to offer his hand. "It's a pleasure to meet you, sir. Thank you for inviting me into your home."

Arthur gave a small smile as he took the other's hand, and Gilbert noted that the man's brows didn't look so intimidating when a smile was there to accompany them.

"Likewise, lad," Arthur said, trying his best not to look like he was staring at every inch of Gilbert's person, which he was.

Just how long had he waited for this moment? To see the young man who'd come into his son's life and left him positively smitten. He was a handsome lad, Arthur would admit, well-groomed and with good posture, eyes clear and alert. He was pleased to find no questionable markings or obnoxious jewelry, none visible to him, anyway. Appearances were only a fraction of Arthur's concern, however, and he especially looked forward to seeing the boy's personality. What struck him the most, aside from Gilbert's unique features, of course, was

how content Matthew looked to be there standing next to him, a perpetual smile fixed on his lips. This was Gilbert, alright.

"I must say I'm a bit starstruck, Gilbert," he continued. "I've been wanting to meet you for quite some time, but it seems my son was quite content to keep me in suspense. Especially when he's always spoken so fondly of you."

"Dad..." Matthew whined softly, face growing warm.

"Thank you for joining us tonight. It's quite comforting to be able to put a face to the name I've heard so much of."

Gilbert held back a laugh as he caught Matthew fidgeting with his hair from the corner of his eye, wondering just what kind of things Matthew had been saying about him, and for how long.

"I'm glad I could finally be here, Mr. Bo—" Gilbert stopped himself, looking from Arthur to Francis, and then back to Arthur. "Ah..."

The two men laughed before Arthur replied, "It's alright, lad. You may call me Mr. Kirkland."

"Mr. Kirkland," Gilbert repeated. Matthew looked to be enjoying himself a little too much, if the smirk on his lips was anything to go by. The cute little shit. "Right."

Gilbert was the son of a diplomat, Arthur and Francis had learned, having moved here from Germany when he was merely seven years old. His younger brother, whom he called Ludwig, was just five at the time, and had cried nearly the entire plane ride over. Gilbert was used to being airborne, he'd explained, his father taking him on different trips even before his brother was born. But the highest Ludwig had ever been off the ground was in a rickety park swing, and Gilbert swore he resembled a raccoon by the time the plane had landed, his brother's comfort taking priority over his need for sleep.

Both men were surprised to learn that he and his brother currently lived alone, his father made to return to Germany to continue on with his civic duties. Gilbert was just fourteen when his father first left on business for Berlin, thinking it better not to uproot his son's lives a second time. He was never away for more than a few weeks before booking a flight back home, Gilbert assured them, and they talked with their father often via phone and post cards. Money wasn't a problem either, since they were supported by remittances their father sent from abroad. It was a unique situation that neither Arthur nor Francis expected to hear, but both could see that the boy was mature for his age; it wouldn't have been presumptuous to assume his upbringing played a significant role.

Matthew could have listened to Gilbert talk about himself for hours, and he smiled to himself each time his boyfriend was able to elicit a laugh from his parents. Dinner was going well, and he could feel himself relaxing as Gilbert casually spoke about the classes he was taking, washing down his last bite of food with a few gulps of milk.

"Ah, Matthew, dear, you've got some..." Arthur trailed off, his lips twitching up at one end.

"Hm?" Matthew answered, setting down his spoon.

"Can't say I've ever imagined what you'd look like with a mustache," Gilbert said with a tiny snort. "A lot cuter than I expected."

Matthew gasped as it then clicked, Gilbert's teasing tone a dead giveaway. He quickly reached for the napkin beneath his plate, blushing as he wiped away the faint strip of white. "Like you've never had one," he mumbled.

Francis watched the exchange between them, the smile Matthew failed to hide behind his napkin, the playful grin on Gilbert's face and the way his eyes narrowed ever so slightly in his son's direction. And he almost laughed aloud. Was this young man *flirting* with his son right in front of him? With his son responding in kind, no less? His husband seemed to notice too, because before he could even open his mouth, Arthur beat him to it.

"Perhaps this is a bit crude for dinner conversation, but as a father I must ask," he started. "Have you boys become...intimate?"

The room was soon filled with the sounds of Gilbert coughing, disrupting the milk running down his throat. Matthew's napkin had fallen to the floor as he started, his forehead colliding with the table as he went to grab it. The napkin wasn't so much important to him as was the desire to hide his face, which he knew was a bright red. He groaned as his head began to pulsate. And dinner had been going so smoothly.

Francis reached over and gave Gilbert's back a few pitiful pats, while Arthur soothed a hand over Matthew's head, face painted with worry. It was a little more blunt than Arthur had been aiming for, sure, but he didn't want to dillydally around the subject. He too was a teenage boy once, and knew it was foolish to expect teenagers to practice restraint. He just wanted to know if they were being safe.

"I assume that's a yes?" Francis chuckled.

"No!" they shouted. Or, tried to. Matthew answered with more of a squawk, while Gilbert's voice was a bit hoarse from coughing so much.

Gilbert gulped as Francis raised a brow, looking almost offended, and suddenly words were leaving his mouth without his permission. "N-Not that I wouldn't like to, sir."

The words had escaped so quickly that Gilbert had not but a second to realize what he'd just done. His stomach dropped as three pairs of widened eyes shifted in his direction. His regret was immediate, though dread quickly took its place when he saw Matthew's face, flushed a raw, ripe red that reached even his neck. Gilbert had always hated that 'deer caught in headlights' cliche, but that was exactly the expression Matthew now wore, and he felt like a scumbag. Because this was the first time Matthew was hearing this, and it was in front of his parents for Christ's sake. Gilbert could deal with the burning shame of his own embarrassment, but seeing that he'd made Matthew uncomfortable made him want to claw at his own face. God, he was such a fucking idiot.

"B-But that's not to say we *have* to," he said quickly. "What I meant was...no, we haven't, and that's fine with me." His eyes left Matthew to dart between Arthur and Francis. Their expressions had become unreadable, and he licked his lips before he spoke again. "Matthew means so much more to me than just sex."

Silence filled the room as Gilbert's heart raced. Matthew looked even redder than before, and if not for what happened next, Gilbert might have started to question whether or not he deserved to be sitting at this table at all. He froze as Matthew's hand found his from beneath the table. Having Matthew's palm against his made him realize how clammy his own was. But Matthew didn't seem to mind, slipping his fingers between Gilbert's. It was like finding a life raft among endless miles of open sea. Maybe Gilbert didn't need to tread after all.

Arthur didn't quite know how to react, his gentlemanly senses thinking he should be scandalized, while his fatherly senses leaned more towards startled respect. The silence was broken when Francis laughed, lively and loud. The sound made Gilbert jump, as he'd been bracing himself for his imminent dismissal, along with the sound of a door being slammed behind him. He'd gone and blown it, he was sure, his chance to impress Matthew's parents completely destroyed beyond repair. But this sound he was hearing, it was happy. Dare he say...fond? He felt as if he might cry when he saw Arthur crack the smallest smile.

"My, what a fascinating night this has turned out to be," Francis laughed, a hand rubbing the stubble at his jaw. "It seems your vision of the future may be coming true, Gilbert."

A shy laugh was all that Gilbert could manage. But beneath the table, he gripped the hand that held his, sending a message that only Matthew could decipher. *Thank you.*

Matthew squeezed back. *No, thank* you.

Gilbert squeezed out some more dish soap onto his sponge, the bright green liquid sudsing up as he scrubbed another plate. He figured he should get a head start while Mr. Kirkland cleared the rest of the table, knowing that two sets of hands were always better than one. He sighed softly as the lime scented soap filled his nostrils, bubbles forming along the surface of the water that filled the sink. He had survived the night. And with a stomach full of fucking delicious brownies to boot. Despite the small blunders committed on his part, Gilbert couldn't have been anymore relieved. He looked up from his gloved hands to the pictures that sat attached to the fridge, held in place by colorful little magnets.

They were family photos.

Matthew and Alfred looked to be very young in most of them, probably about four or five in some, seven or eight in others. One in particular caught Gilbert's eye, specifically because Matthew's parents looked to be on the verge of tears. Matthew and Alfred were dressed identically, in white t-shirts and red shorts. The only difference between them was that Matthew was absolutely filthy, his bright white shirt muddled with blotches of brown, hair flying every which way, as if he'd been spit out by a tornado. Alfred didn't seem to mind, his little arms thrown around Matthew's shoulders in a tight hug, a toothy grin on his face. Their parents' arms surrounded them, faces lit with unmistakable joy. Gilbert's eyes fell back on Matthew, smile so big it rivaled his brother's, and he could feel himself melt.

And then he could feel his smile faltering, and his hand slowly stopped scrubbing, because they looked so happy. Like his family used to be. And he could feel that dreaded emotion rising to the surface, jealousy, and he hated himself for it.

"Oh, Gilbert, please, you don't have to do that," came Arthur's voice from behind him, and the plate in Gilbert's hand almost slipped from his grip. "We'll just use the dishwasher," he said, placing the rest of the dirty dishes into the other half of the sink where Gilbert had placed his stack. Arthur had gladly accepted when Gilbert offered to help clear the table, but washing the dishes was inexcusable for a guest in his home.

"I don't mind it, Mr. Kirkland. Besides, if I wash them by hand, it'll be faster anyway. Plus, this is kinda therapeutic for me," he said with a laugh.

"No, I couldn't allow you to do that, lad. We may have sized you up a bit at dinner, but you are still our guest."

"It's no problem, sir, really." He grinned. "You can't ask me to leave this unfinished now, I'm already halfway done."

Arthur peeked discreetly into the sink, realizing that the boy was indeed right. He sighed. "Well, if you insist on being so stubborn, grab that towel hanging from the cabinet there." Gilbert frowned, looking from the French flag designed towel that hung from the cabinet above his head, to the Englishman. "You'll dry while I wash," Arthur said with a smile. "Come on now, off with the gloves."

"Yes, sir," Gilbert chuckled, doing as he was told.

A comfortable silence settled between the two of them, Gilbert carefully drying each dish that was handed to him and setting them in the rack on the counter.

"I can't remember what that fridge looked like before we stuck all of those on it," Arthur said suddenly, voice soft over the sounds of sloshing water and clanking silverware. Gilbert looked to Arthur, whose eyes were focused on a particularly stubborn piece of food. "I noticed you looking them over."

"Oh," Gilbert said, pink spreading across his pale face.

"I always take the time to stop and look at them," Arthur continued. "I could be running late in the morning, no time for a proper breakfast, and I'd still make sure I took a few moments to look at my boys. That includes Francis, believe it or not," he laughed softly.

Gilbert looked to the fridge again, eyes settling again on that particular photo. "I...hope it's not rude of me to ask, but," he said, pointing to the little polaroid, "what happened in this photo?" Arthur paused in his cleaning to glance over at said photo, smile now showing teeth. "Matthew's so..."

"He just looks an absolute mess, doesn't he?"

"Well," Gilbert laughed, "yeah."

"But Francis and I do too, so I've no right to talk," he said, handing Gilbert another plate. "The boys were just kindergarteners there. That day they were having a sports festival. I remember Francis and I both took off of work to attend. It was such a big deal because, well..." Arthur paused for a moment, adding more soap to his sponge. "I'm quite sure you're already aware of this, but Matt lost his eyes to cancer when he was still just a baby."

"Yes," Gilbert replied, nodding.

"That photo was taken just a year after he lost them. And that smile on his face..." The Brit sighed. "God, it'd been such a long time since we'd seen him smiling like that. After the surgery, he didn't just lose his sight. He'd lost his confidence, his sense of security, his independence. All of it. Gone in an instant. My precious little boy, he...he coiled into himself. He didn't want to go anywhere without Francis or I there. Clung to Alfred like he was the air he breathed."

Gilbert listened intently as Arthur spoke, hanging on his every word, hearing the answers to unspoken questions he'd always felt he'd had no right to ask. Arthur's voice grew even softer, his voice beginning to sound further and further away.

"Enrolling them both into kindergarten was torture. Because I knew Matthew wasn't ready, and I knew that I was relying on Alfred to help him through it. And Alfred," Arthur laughed. "Alfred was willing to go to a kindergarten for blind children we'd discovered, just so he could stay with Matthew. But of course that wasn't appropriate, and splitting them up was absolutely out of the question, so we sent them to the school a few blocks away, together."

"Matthew started getting better. Much better. He'd come off the bus after school telling me of all the things he'd done during the day. Silly little games or dances, sometimes a song he'd learned or a craft he'd made. It was wonderful. And at the end of the year they had their sports day. And I admit, I was worried because Matthew had grown to dislike sports. Sports and blindness don't complement each other quite well, as I'm sure you can imagine."

The two shared a laugh.

"But Francis and I were shocked. Matthew was trying his hardest at everything. Jumping jacks, the hula hoop, even held the jump rope for the other children. And at the very end there was a race, just from one end of the school yard to the other. The whistle blew, and Matthew ran."

"He...ran?" Gilbert repeated, and Arthur nodded. "But how didn't he...?"

"He fell straight on his face. Hence him looking so filthy there," he said, motioning to the picture.

"Ah," Gilbert snorted. "Makes sense."

"But Alfred picked him right up and grabbed him by the hand, and they kept running. And they won. First place." Arthur began draining the sink as Gilbert dried the last cup, slipping off his gloves with a smile that screamed pride.

"Wow..."

"Wow indeed." Arthur turned to Gilbert, and Gilbert thought he saw something like sadness in his eyes. "For a while it seemed like Matthew had started to coil into himself again. Until he met you. And I saw him start to smile again, just like in that photo." Arthur sighed again, not with malice, but with ease. "All I ask of you is that you take care of my boy, Gilbert. Take care of him, and protect that smile I love so much."

Gilbert looked down at that photo once more, taking in little Matthew's bright smile, ashamed at how he'd allowed his own self-pity, his own bitterness, to distort something so incredibly beautiful. He looked to Arthur.

"I will, sir." Because he loved that smile too. "I swear I will."

Chapter End Notes

Twelve chapters in and Gilbert's family situation is finally mentioned beyond a single sentence. (・∀・)

Probably still too briefly for some of your tastes, but more will come to light about Gilbert's relationship with his family as the story continues on. So, for those of you who may have been wondering how the *heck* two jobless high school boys have been managing without parents at home, I hope this chapter helped clear that up a bit.

Also, Gilbert Beilschmidt has officially received the FrUK Stamp of Approval ©.

Yearning

Chapter Summary

Matthew spends some time with the Vargas twins.

Chapter Notes

0/10 dentists recommend this chapter for strong and healthy teeth.

⠠⠓⠕⠺ ⠓⠕⠠⠎⠽

"Hey, you." Matthew made a puzzled expression as he registered the sound of snapping fingers, quick and abrupt. "The fuck's your problem?"

And Matthew knew the words weren't directed at him, because Lovino never talked to him like that.

For the five short months Matthew had known him, his voice had always been a bit gruff, his choice of words often of the more colorful variety. But Matthew had come to find his frankness strangely endearing, the boy's mannerisms a stark contrast to that of his peppier twin. Matthew could appreciate that, being a twin himself, and knowing just how different his own personality was from Alfred's. The persistent grumbling and heavy bouts of sarcasm were distinctly Lovino Vargas, and Matthew found himself laughing more often than not when he was around, vaguely reminded of his father before his first cup of morning tea.

Lovino scowled at the target of his questioning as they made eye contact, the boy's eyes tearing from Matthew to look at him. He shrunk back in his seat, looking as if he might soil himself, the piercings on his bottom lip disappearing into his mouth. The fact that the boy had yet to say anything only made Lovino angrier.

"What, are you deaf?"

It was obvious that Lovino was talking to, or rather *at*, the only other person at the table, the one whose voice Matthew could barely remember because he hadn't spoken but a sentence or two since he'd joined them. Matthew had tried to cut the guy some slack, thinking that maybe he was just socially awkward or that he didn't work well in groups. He'd be the *last* person to hold that against someone. But he had to admit, the stranger's silence didn't make much for contribution in what was supposed to be a group discussion.

He was actually surprised by how long Lovino had gone without saying anything, considering his short temper. The more he spoke, though, the more Matthew realized that this wasn't a case of simple irritation. He was...*livid*. And as Matthew sat there helplessly between the two, mind still a jumble of scientific jargon, he had to wonder what exactly had caused things to escalate so quickly.

"No?" he replied, sounding like he wasn't really sure of the answer himself.

"Then what the hell is your problem?"

The boy quickly looked away, his shaggy bangs, greasy and long overdue for a cut, obscuring his eyes from view. "What are you talking about?"

Lovino scoffed. The nerve of this bastard, playing dumb. He and Matthew had been fine until this asshole walked into the room, coming into class forty-five minutes late with some bullshit excuse for the teacher. He'd been added to their group, annoying Lovino immediately just for the fact that now he and Matthew couldn't freely chatter like they had been.

What was this kid's name? Jared? Jeff? Jerry? Lovino couldn't remember, and he had no desire to. It had been a little over a month into the new semester and this was only the third time Lovino had seen the guy's face. He'd obviously changed his mind about skipping class today for whatever reason. His showing up uninvited was irritating enough, but the longer he sat there, the more Lovino's blood began to boil. Lovino could see him from the corner of his eye, staring. Just fucking staring. When Matthew flipped a page in his book, the kid would stare. When Matthew reached for his water, the kid would stare. Like Matthew lifting a bottle of Evian to his lips was the most earth-shattering thing he'd ever witnessed. It had him remembering things he'd rather not.

"Don't fuck with me, kid." Matthew's fingertips froze against the word "ozone," eyes growing wide. "You aren't gonna sit in my face and stare at him like you're at a fucking zoo."

Matthew sat back in his chair, his hands sliding into his lap as he listened to their third member begin to stutter out some kind of response.

Oh.

"Didn't your mommy teach you when you were five that it's fucking rude to stare? Or do you just not give a fuck because you know Matt can't see you?"

Lovino had long forgotten the worksheet in front of him, the paper crumpling beneath his elbow as he leaned forward on his desk. He glared as the other looked away again, shamefaced, like all of them did when they were caught. Like all of them did when they realized they were bigoted pieces of shit. That expression, that mixture of repulsion and fascination, he could recognize it from a mile away. Because that was the same way people looked at Gilbert. Hell if he was going to sit here and watch it happen to Matthew, too. It didn't matter that Matthew couldn't see it, because *he* sure as hell could. And he was fucking sick of having his friends gawked at like they were some kind of otherworldly creatures.

"Look, man, I'm sorry, ok?" His lip had started to redden from nibbling at the pair of rings attached to them. He looked to Matthew, mostly because the other boy's eyes were burning holes into his skin. "It's just that, well, you..." He let out a nervous laugh. "You don't really blink a lot. And well, it's kinda, um..."

Matthew was silent for a moment, a bit unsettled that someone had been observing him so closely. He'd never been one to pay attention to the number of times he opened and closed his eyes throughout the day, nor had anyone ever brought it to his attention. It was definitely a first, and he wasn't really sure what to say, feeling color begin to spread across his face. It was kind of...what? Weird? No...*creepy*. That was it. Matthew was sure that was how the sentence was going to end. But its ending never came as Lovino's voice hit Matthew's ears again, words blistering like hot coals against bare feet.

"So the fuck what? How does that affect you?"

"I'm not sayin' it does, alright? Chill out. I said I was sorry, didn't I?"

"It's not me who needs your half-assed apology, *cazzo*."

Matthew swallowed, the sound of students giggling, chattering, goofing off, slowly disappearing into the background. He slowly closed his book, his fingers trembling slightly against the hardback cover. Lovino wasn't just angry. Lovino was angry on *his* behalf. Being stared at was nothing new for Matthew, not that he could always tell when it was happening. Like now, for example. He'd been completely oblivious, as he was sure he'd been countless other times, when people had free tickets to come and gawk at The Amazing Matthew.

But Lovino had just snatched those tickets away. Torn them up. Shattered the glass display window he hadn't even known he'd been forced behind. And Matthew felt warm suddenly, the sharp, piercing chill of his mounting anxiety melting clean away. *This* was what it felt like. This was what it was *supposed* to feel like, he reminded himself. To have friends. Friends who truly cared about him. True friendship was something that he once believed he'd find solely in the company of his brother, and he'd long resigned himself to that fate, the thought comforting and yet pitiful all the same. But this gruff voice and sharp tongue seemed hellbent on reminding him just how wrong he'd been.

Class was dismissed as the bell rang out, papers shuffling, chairs scraping against the floor as students rushed for the door. Matthew heard a mumble of apology as the late-comer passed him, moving so fast he could feel a gust of air as he hurried by. Lovino scoffed again, saying something Matthew couldn't understand before throwing his back pack over his shoulder.

"Lovino..."

"I've gotta get my algebra book from Feli for next class, so I'll go on ahead. Idiot forgot to give it back to me last night."

"Oh, well alright," Matthew replied as he got to his feet.

"We're in the studio today," Lovino called over his shoulder. "Door's open."

"Okay," Matthew called back as he gathered his things, sporting a smile that he couldn't wipe away.

Matthew wouldn't be going home in Gilbert's passenger seat today, nor would Gilbert see Matthew's shoes placed at his door. It had become so routine, Matthew spending afternoons on Gilbert's couch, in his room, in his basement. Matthew had gotten so used to having Gilbert in his kitchen, snagging fruit off the counter, stealing pillows from his bed, lying next to him on his floor. They'd gotten so used to it that when Gilbert approached Matthew's locker at day's end, he had to remember that the boy in front of it wasn't coming with him. And as Gilbert's car keys jingled, Matthew had to remember the same.

"I should start charging you," Matthew said, Gilbert snickering as he was handed his jacket. "There's more of *your* stuff in here than mine, and it's *my* locker."

"Whatever." He grinned, slipping it over his shoulders. "You know you love having all my stuff in there."

Matthew smirked, crossing his arms at his chest. "Or is it that you love having all your stuff in my locker?"

"Of course I fucking love it," he replied, Matthew handing him his scarf. "How else would I get to harass you between classes?"

It was true; they didn't share any classes together this semester. None with the exception of a lunch block.

"Don't remind me." He made a soft noise of surprise as Gilbert pulled him in by collar of his sweater, his hand pressed against the small of Matthew's back.

"Like you don't like it."

Matthew's hand pushed half-heartedly at his chest. Gilbert didn't miss the coy little smile he tried to hide. "Well, whose fault is that?"

"Guilty."

Matthew laughed as Gilbert pulled him in again, feeling his arm come round his waist. "Gil," he said, his voice suddenly a whisper. "We're in the *hallway*."

"*Ja*," he whispered back, just to tease him. He brought the locker door in on its squeaky hinges to block Matthew from view, for modesty's sake. "An *empty* hallway."

"But...people are still walking around the school and someone could..." Matthew trailed off as Gilbert's nose brushed against his, his face growing hotter.

"Could?" he repeated, breath peppered with a long-discarded stick of Spearmint.

"Could..."

Gilbert's face was already so close, and the hall was still so quiet. And Matthew's hand was already against his cheek, not that he remembered putting it there. He really hadn't stood a chance. Gilbert had planned to be awesome and smooth and kiss those lips the minute he unraveled, but Matthew beat him to it, pressing his lips to Gilbert's not once but thrice, each meeting of their lips longer than the last. It reduced him to a blushing mute. Matthew seemed to be doing a lot of that lately.

"Wow," he finally managed to say, to which Matthew simply laughed and smiled.

And then someone else laughed. Giggled. It was distant.

The two of them froze, recognizing the voice immediately. And Matthew would've been just fine with Gilbert shutting him inside his locker right then and there.

Gilbert looked down the hall to see Feliciano casually walking their way, waving at them, Ludwig following closely behind him. Gilbert held up his hand in greeting.

"Aw, Mattie, you're so lucky. Lud doesn't like to kiss in public."

Matthew suppressed a groan as he heard Gilbert close his locker—with him still not in it.

"Feliciano," Ludwig mumbled, face going scarlet.

"It's true!" he said, pouting at his boyfriend before looking back to Matthew. "I have to steal them when he's not looking," he giggled again.

Matthew shook his head, laughing nervously. "I...don't really like to either, actually."

"Really?" Feliciano flashed that cheeky smile of his. "Then what was that you were doing just now?"

Traitor, Matthew thought, cheeks flaring. Feliciano could be such a smug little shit when he wanted to. And somehow still manage to sound as sweet and innocent as ever.

"It wasn't 'public' until you two *made* it public, you nosy little minx," Gilbert shot back.

"Oops," he replied, though his expression would suggest otherwise. Ludwig cleared his throat.

"Anyway, we need to get going, Gilbert." He glanced at his wristwatch. "Aster's appointment is in an hour, and we need to hurry home. You know how anxious she gets before her annual check-ups."

Feliciano smiled at how concerned he sounded. He'd always found it so sweet how much Ludwig cared for his dog, always spoiling her absolutely rotten (though he would adamantly deny anything of the sort). He'd been tickled when he found a photo of the retriever in his boyfriend's wallet, like a proud father might have of his child. But Aster wasn't the only source of Ludwig's pride; Blackie and Berlitz had spots reserved in his wallet too. Feliciano had fond memories of the days when the Beilschmidt home had three canines instead of just

one, and how he'd been terrified of all three of them until a five year old Ludwig showed him how to give good belly rubs.

But when it came time for Mr. Beilschmidt to return to Germany, Blackie and Berlitz had to go too. Three huge dogs were too much responsibility for two young boys, he'd reasoned. (They could live at home alone, but their *dearest Vati* thought a little dog-walking was "too much" for them, a thirteen year old Gilbert had grumbled in the cafeteria for weeks after.) Feliciano knew that Ludwig missed his other dogs dearly, and as a result, doted on Aster three times as much in their absence. Gilbert knew this too, so as fussy as Ludwig was with their sweet little retriever, he couldn't really blame him. He missed them too.

"*Ja*, I know. I'm ready," Gilbert said, pulling out his keys.

"I hope her appointment goes smoothly."

Ludwig smiled. "Thank you, Matthew."

"She'll be fine, it's just a check-up. Lutz is acting like she's having pups or something." Ludwig looked appalled by the idea, causing Feliciano to laugh. "But *danke*." Matthew nodded. "You know, she'd be *really* happy if you could come over tomorrow after school. She's gonna miss you not being there to spoil her today."

Matthew smirked. "Would she also be *really* happy if I brought some of Papa's cookies with me? The ones with white chocolate chips?"

"*Really* fucking happy."

Ludwig and Feliciano looked at each other before looking away, subtle smiles on their faces as they let the other two have their moment.

"Okay," Matthew laughed. "I think I can do that."

"Awesome. Here, Lutz, I'm riding shot gun," he said, tossing his brother the keys. And without thinking too much about it he brought a kiss to Matthew's forehead, sticking out his tongue at Feliciano. Feliciano responded in kind. "*Tschüss, Schatz.*"

"Bye," he said softly, listening to Ludwig scold Gilbert about his unzipped jacket.

Feliciano watched the two brothers retreat down the hall, Gilbert walking backwards for no other reason than to get one last look at Matthew. He grinned wide as Matthew sent him a little wave, nearly tripping over his own feet before they disappeared around the corner. Feliciano did his best to hold back the squeal bubbling in his throat. But he had never been very good at practicing restraint.

Matthew jumped as he cried, "I can't believe you two waited so long to date!"

"Yeah," he replied sheepishly as they began to walk, "I know."

"Will you be sitting in on Alfred's practice today?" he asked. "Lovino and I are in the studio today, so if you wanted some quiet, you're welcome to come join us."

"Thanks, Feli. I'll come by in a few minutes. I'll just pop in on Alfred first and let him know I'm still here."

He nodded, hands clapping together in celebration. "We'll be waiting for you then." Matthew smiled as Feliciano turned the opposite corner, his skips echoing down the empty hall.

Matthew breathed in deeply, appreciating the heavy smell of paint and thinner. The studio always smelled heavenly; it didn't matter what Feliciano was doing. Some days it was charcoal or clay, other days it was papier mâché for props. Matthew sat at the table across from him, listening to his continuous brush strokes, some short and quick, some slow and drawn out. He could feel himself nodding off, the sun hitting his face through the window as he closed his eyes. He could hear Lovino too, working in the darkroom a few feet away, shuffling photographs, footsteps slow and deliberate as he moved about the room.

The first time Matthew had stepped into the studio was early December of last year, when Feliciano pulled him inside one day after school. He'd left the gym to stretch his legs a bit, his lower half having fallen asleep after sitting on the benches for so long. Ten minutes or so was all he'd needed, and as he began heading back to Alfred's practice, he'd heard Feliciano's voice call from the end of the hall. Surprised to find him wandering the halls after hours, Matthew had asked what he'd stayed after for. Feliciano had answered by taking him to this room.

The studio was really just an extension of the art classroom, which was just the next room over. Feliciano had special permission to use the room after school hours, Matthew had learned, due to his near constant work for school plays. He'd been working on a background for The Nutcracker the first time he'd brought Matthew inside. This afternoon was dedicated to Hamlet. It wouldn't debut for another four months, Feliciano said, but he had multiple backdrops to paint and he'd wanted to start early. It sounded quite stressful to Matthew, and sometimes he worried about Feliciano pushing himself too hard, but he could tell Feliciano really loved what he did.

"Let me know if you want anything, ok, Matthew?" Feliciano said, voice breaking the comfortable silence. His tone was gentle, pensive, much softer than usual. Matthew couldn't help but notice how mellow his friend became with a brush in his hand. "Paint, clay, anything. There's plenty of it in the storage room."

"Thanks, but I'm alright," he replied, appreciating the offer, but knowing he'd just make an utter mess. Plus, it would just go to waste. Better to save it for the real artists, he reasoned. The ones who'd done more than squeeze Play-doh and finger paint in Pull-ups.

He closed his eyes again, slumping forward onto the table, a hand resting under his chin. He listened in on Lovino's footsteps again, wondering exactly what he was doing in that little room. Whatever he was doing in there, it was clear that he was thoroughly absorbed in it. He'd disappeared behind its door a half an hour ago, and had yet to come out since. Lovino had called it a "darkroom," a room for processing black and white photos. The name made Matthew want to chuckle; every room was dark to him. He wanted to see what made this one so special.

Suddenly, Feliciano spoke again.

"I'm so glad Gilbert met you." Matthew's eyes snapped open, startled with how sudden it was. "You make him really happy."

Matthew's hand left his face to play with his hair, but he'd forgotten it was pulled back, so he settled for the loose threads on his sweater instead. He fiddled with his sleeve, feeling ridiculous with how little time it had taken for his cheeks to start going haywire. Gilbert's name was like a spark, his mind and body responding in an instant like fire to gasoline. "You...think so?"

"I know so," Feliciano replied, swiping gingerly at his palette. "And I can tell he makes you happy too."

Matthew's smile grew wider, though concealed behind the palm of his hand. "He's..." he said softly, pulling his hand away so as not to muffle his voice. "He's not even here and I'm still grinning like an idiot." He sighed, planting a cheek against the smooth tabletop. "It's embarrassing."

Feliciano laughed as he caught Matthew's reflection in the window, face a perfect match for the shade of red coating his brush.

"Would you still be embarrassed if I told you that you have that power too?" He nodded as Matthew lifted his head. "Mmhm. Sometimes Gil gets super quiet on the ride home, and when I peek through the mirror, I catch him all curled up by the window, smiling at his phone like it's the most precious thing in the world. That's how I know he's texting you."

"It's that obvious, huh?" Matthew laughed to himself, feeling a little less ridiculous. And extremely flattered.

"Everything is obvious with you two," he teased, smiling as he looked again at Matthew's image in the windowpane.

"So I've heard," Matthew chuckled.

"But...you really do mean a lot to him. I can tell, especially now," he said, voice becoming progressively softer as he spoke. "The last time I've seen him so happy like this, we were just little kids."

The sound of Feliciano's paintbrush faded into the back of Matthew's mind, the smile on his lips slowly disappearing as he fully processed the other's words. "Has he...not been? Happy?"

Feliciano paused, brush hovering above his paper. Matthew noticed his hesitation and sat up in his chair. "Mm, well..." came his answer, rather cryptic. "Happiness is relative, isn't it?" The brunette looked thoughtfully down at his work from where he sat on the floor, the colors softening as the paint began to dry. "I don't think Gilbert realized how much happier his happy could be until he met you."

Matthew shifted uncomfortably in his seat, unused to Feliciano being so vague. On the surface his words seemed encouraging enough, but then again, they hadn't exactly answered his question. He sensed that there was more to them than his friend was letting on. But maybe he was wrong. And if he was, then so be it. But this nagging feeling in his chest was convincing him otherwise, and he wanted it to disappear. He hesitated a bit before he responded.

"What do you mean when you say...'his' happy?"

"Well, what I mean is..." he trailed off, setting his brush off to the side with an inaudible sigh. "He's had his own version of 'happy' for a while now. I...we...wouldn't exactly call it that."

The room fell completely silent. No bristles against paper, no footsteps from the darkroom. It lasted only for a few seconds, broken by a single word.

"Why?"

Feliciano turned around at the sound of Matthew's voice, just a whisper, his palette dropping from his fingers when he saw the frown on Matthew's face. *Oh, Dio, he hadn't meant to make Matthew upset. He knew he couldn't say anything more than he already had, out of respect for Gilbert's privacy. Matthew would already know about it if Gilbert wanted him to, and Feliciano was sure Gilbert would tell him when he was ready. He wasn't going to take that away from him.*

"It's...not really my place to say," he said, slowly rising from the floor to his feet.

"Oh," Matthew said softly. Just the thought of Gilbert not being happy, not laughing in that contagious way that he did, not hearing his smile in every word that he spoke, it made Matthew feel cold. A moment or two passed before he added, "I understand."

And he did understand. He understood that he hadn't known Gilbert for as long as Feliciano, or Lovino, or Antonio. Who would he be to try and force himself inside a bolted safe without a key, with no regard for the fragility of what was inside? He understood that everyone had things they preferred to keep private, understood that no one was free of life's trials and tribulations, understood that he wasn't entitled to know every single thing about Gilbert's life just because they were dating.

Because that was what dating was, wasn't it? Getting to know someone you care for, becoming comfortable enough with each other to share those private thoughts aloud. It was a process. It wouldn't happen overnight, Matthew knew that. But it didn't stop him from *wanting* to be that person to Gilbert. Someone he trusted with his hardships. Someone he could confide in. He hoped he could be that someone, *yearned* to be that someone to him. However long it would take.

"But I meant everything that I said. You make him really, *really* happy. All of us can see that," Feliciano continued, determined to shoo away any doubt he may have caused. "The night he confessed to you, on the car ride home, he said he was so relieved he could cry. He was so glad that you felt the same way he did."

Matthew's smile quickly returned, a dizzying warmth traveling from his head to his toes. "I'm glad he did too."

Feliciano sighed. "You guys are so—"

"Cute?" Matthew finished for him, having heard it more than enough times.

"In love," he said, wiping the palms of his hands on his smock.

"O-Oh."

"And cute," he laughed. "I'm going to go get cleaned up, ok? I'll be back in a few minutes."

"Alright, take your time."

Matthew brought his hands to his face, fingers splaying across his singeing cheeks. Gilbert said that? About him? "Oh my god," he mumbled to himself, unable to stop smiling. Gilbert had him doing that a lot lately.

"Hey, Matt."

He jumped and whipped around, bracing for Lovino to ask him who the hell he was talking to. "Y-Yeah?"

"Think you could do something for me?" he asked, head poking out of the darkroom.

"Oh. Yeah, sure." He grabbed for his cane at the other end of the table. "What do you need?"

"You. Bring your phone."

"Uh, ok," he said, chuckling a bit.

"Wait." Matthew froze as he reached the door, a deep red glow spilling out of the room. "You gotta piss or anything?"

"No?"

"Alright," he said, stepping to the side to allow Matthew entrance. "Come in."

Lovino flipped the light on as Matthew walked in, his eyes taking a moment to adjust after being in darkness for so long. He was greeted with Matthew's puzzled expression, prompting him to explain himself. "I asked because the door needs to stay closed while I develop this last batch of prints. If the door opens before they're done processing, then they're fucked."

"Wow," he replied, stopping as the tip of his cane hit the leg of a table. "Are they really that sensitive?"

"Yeah," he answered, shutting the door. "One eight-thousandth of a second. That's all it takes for light to get through and ruin your entire session. After so many blanks you learn to piss

before you start, or hold that shit in and wait." He smirked when Matthew snorted, but he was being totally serious.

"I never knew it was so intense."

Lovino shrugged. "It doesn't have to be. Normally there's a revolving door. The other darkroom we use for all the photography classes has one. That way you can come in and out and not worry about letting in any light. This one's old as shit, but Feli gets me access to it so I'm not complaining." He made his way across the room for his backpack, left sitting exactly where he'd left it against the wall.

"It smells really...citrusy in here." Matthew sniffed again just to make sure he wasn't just imagining things. No, he was right. Very lemony, and pleasantly so. "I expected it to smell more, well, chemical-y." It was his first time being inside a room like this, and it was exciting to be experiencing something new.

"Yeah, you're right. It doesn't usually smell this good. But the fixer I'm using is odorless and the stop bath's citric based. It's the fixer that usually smells the worst," he explained, rummaging around in his backpack.

Matthew nodded along like he knew what a fixer and a stop bath were.

"I'm pretty used to it, so it doesn't really bother me like it used to, but I always try to change clothes after I finish a session if I can. Toni'll just complain about the smell otherwise. Whiny bastard." Lovino grinned in silent victory as he came across what he was looking for. "You hungry?" he asked. "I've got an extra granola bar if you want it."

Now that Matthew thought about it, he sort of was. Alfred had ended up eating more of his lunch than he did. He hadn't had time to make his own lunch this morning, and had to buy one instead. It hadn't been the tastiest. But maybe he was just spoiled by his papa's culinary prowess. "Sure, I'll take it," he replied, smiling as Lovino placed it in his hand. "Thanks."

Lovino nodded, leaning against the wall behind them. "I'd offer you a place to sit, but there is none, so." He shrugged again. "We aren't even supposed to be eating in here, but I'm hungry and need a break."

"It's fine, I don't mind it," he laughed, taking a bite of his granola. It was fruity and nutty, and the discovery made him a little more happier than it should have. "So what did you need my help with anyway?" he asked as an afterthought.

"Developing prints." Lovino looked across the room where a few finished photos were hanging from the ceiling, nearly dry. "We've only got forty five minutes left before we need to close up and I'm kinda behind. Figured I could finish on time if I had another pair of hands."

"Oh..." Matthew made sure to swallow before he spoke again. "But I don't know all that much about film photography. I'd just slow you d—"

"Then I'll teach you." Lovino smirked as Matthew turned to him, obviously not expecting the response he'd been given. "Why not? It'll be hard to fuck up when I'm standing right next to you."

Matthew's smile was instantaneous, that warm, tingly feeling surging within him once again, as if to remind him it had never left. As if to remind him that this was Lovino Vargas that he was talking to. His friend. And it felt just as amazing as before. "Alright," he said. "What's first?"

"First, let me give you a quick run down of all the tools."

Just like Feliciano, Lovino became another person when he was in his element. More talkative, noticeably eager. Matthew knew that photography was a hobby of his, and the way he talked about the different tools and techniques, voice filled with such enthusiasm, brought a smile to his face. Though he was seasoned in the art, he was still patient with Matthew, letting him get used to the feel of equipment in his hand, taking him step by step through the different chemicals, what they did and why each were necessary. The first tray of liquid was what made the image appear, Lovino had told him, the developer. The next two trays were filled with the stop bath and the fixer, which stopped the developer and stabilized the image, respectively. Matthew would probably forget all of this by tomorrow morning, but he was grateful for Lovino's explanations.

The liquid sloshed a bit as Matthew dipped his tongs inside the first of three trays, prodding around until he felt them hit the corner of the print submerged inside. It took a few seconds for him to grab hold of it, the task a bit difficult with solely touch at his disposal, but he managed, pulling it out for Lovino to take.

"Relax, Matt," Lovino snickered, taking and plopping the print into the next tray. "You're standing straight as a damn soldier. If you drop it, it's not the end of the world." Matthew laughed, not realizing how tense he was until he felt his shoulders drop. "I'm not gonna bite your ear off for doing *me* a favor."

"Yeah, I know, but I'm a perfectionist, alright?" He smirked. "The less fucking up I do, the better." The metallic sound of Lovino's tongs hitting the floor startled him. "Are you ok?"

Lovino quickly retrieved them from the ground, picking imaginary lint from his clothes as he cleared his throat. "Fine," he said brusquely. After a few seconds he added, "It's weird as shit to hear you curse."

The taller boy laughed, another snort behind his hand. "Didn't mean to startle you." Lovino simply mumbled and passed him another print. "By the way, why did you tell me to bring my phone?"

"Oh. That was more for you than me," he said, transferring another photo into the next tray. "In case you wanted to listen to tunes or something. Some people get bored in here." He hunched his shoulders. "You can if you want."

"Why would I when I'm not bored?" Lovino looked to Matthew, his unfocused blue eyes looking incredibly violet under the red glow of the safelight. "I like it in here."

Lovino wouldn't say it aloud, but he had been kind of afraid that Matthew might not find his hobby as interesting as he did. He was glad to have been wrong. "Good," he finally said, smiling to himself. They soon settled into a pleasant silence, Lovino answering whatever questions Matthew had every once in a while, or describing what was in the pictures they were processing. Street sides, park trails, grass damp with fresh morning dew...He skipped over explaining the ones of he and Antonio.

"Hey, Lovino..." Matthew suddenly said, his voice a bit quieter than before.

"Yeah?"

"I just wanted to say thanks. For earlier."

"No need to," he said, pulling down some photos from the ceiling. He replaced them with the new ones Matthew handed him. "Asshole had it coming."

Matthew shuffled his feet. "I wouldn't have even known if you hadn't said anything. I thought the guy was just shy."

"Shy my ass," Lovino scoffed. "I'd wanna know too if someone was staring at me like I was a fucking unicorn. Especially if they were sitting right in front of me."

"A unicorn who doesn't blink enough apparently." Matthew chuckled. "I've known for a while that it scares people that I don't 'look' at them when I talk, but the blinking thing's a first. No one's...ever mentioned it before today, you know?"

"Forget about it, Matt. Don't allow that bastard to make you think any differently about yourself. Not him, or anyone else. You hear me?"

Matthew nodded his head slowly, surprised by the other's words. And then he blushed slightly, ashamed that he'd almost let this person do exactly that. Matthew had improved so much since the beginning of last year, forming new relationships, leaving his comfort zone, experiencing new things, rebuilding his confidence. But like every other person he still had his days, was still vulnerable to insecurity, to doubts and second guesses. But these days he found it happening less and less, and he had all of the people surrounding him, including the Vargas twins, to thank for that.

"Yeah, I..." he replied, "I won't."

"Good." He took another photo from Matthew. "'Cause this right here," he said, bringing a knuckle to tap at the blond's chest, "this is you, Matt. The *real* you. The guy who's weirdly obsessed with flannel and sneaks books into assemblies and talks shit about the cafeteria food." He smirked as he heard the other chuckle. "*This* is you. Not that guy I met last September. That's the guy that assholes like Jerry Whateverthefuck *made* you. So, don't let anyone make you into someone you're not."

Lovino secured the last photo with a clip, color staining his cheeks as he climbed down from his step stool. He hadn't meant to get all mushy-gushy so suddenly, but while he was at it, he figured he might as well get it all out of his system. Truthfully, this had been on his mind for

a while now, seeing how Gilbert had gravitated towards Matthew, how willingly Matthew had responded, how similar they were to each other, how they'd begun to heal one another, even if neither of them fully realized it.

"I'm saying this because I had to watch the same thing happen to Gilbert. And I don't wanna watch it happen to you too. You get treated like shit when you're different. You know what that's like. Gilbert's had to deal with that his entire life. I mean, now, he couldn't give a shit about the way people look at him. Hell, now he laughs when he catches someone staring and waves just to make it more awkward."

The image made Matthew smile a bit.

"But it really used to get to him. And it got to the point where he actually started to believe he was as shitty as people treated him. Acting one way or another because he thought that was how people wanted him to act. And..." Lovino stopped himself, because he knew the next words weren't his to say.

He folded up the stool, setting it back against the wall as he smiled to himself.

"So, that's why as much as he annoys me with his 'I'm awesome' shit, I never really tell him to shut up. Because he deserves to have some pride in himself after all the shit he's been through. And you deserve to have some pride in yourself too."

Matthew took a deep breath, the action ridding him of the tension in his throat. God...this really was what it was supposed to feel like. To *be* like. This was the feeling that he hadn't even realized he'd been missing, that he'd been waiting for, wishing for for so long. A taste of true friendship. It was like lifting a pail of crisp, cool water to cracked and aching lips. Like finally lying head against pillow instead of cold concrete. The type of happiness that brought tears with it. The type of happiness that had Gilbert at its very root. He wondered if Gilbert's happy now felt like this. Hoped that it felt like this.

"You...sound so much like Alfred." He smiled, willing his voice to keep steady. "It must be an older brother thing."

Lovino scoffed. "Must be. 'Cause I've got nothing else in common with that loser."

Matthew was first to laugh, followed by Lovino, and Matthew was glad for the joke, because now he had a legitimate reason to rub away the stinging in his eyes.

"Come on," Lovino said as he opened the door. "Let's break while these prints dry. I'll grab us some sodas from the vending machine." He made sure to hold it open until Matthew reached it himself. "You want anything in particular?"

"Oh, anything is fine," he replied, the door shutting closed quietly behind him. "My wallet's in my bag next to the door, in the front pocket."

"Don't need it," he said, waving a hand.

"But-"

Lovino laughed, the sound breathy. "Matt, it's soda. It's not a big deal. Your help is worth more than a buck seventy-five, alright?"

"Yeah, okay," he said sheepishly, seating himself at the table.

"I'll be back. If anyone else tries to come in here, tell 'em to piss off," Lovino said before slipping out into the hallway.

When he returned, he plopped himself next to Matthew, Matthew thanking him as he slid a bottle his way.

"Feli's right, you know."

Matthew paused in the middle of taking another sip, pulling the bottle away from his lips to mumble, "Hm?"

"He's happy. With you." Lovino smirked at the face Matthew made. "Yeah, I was eavesdropping. Walls are thin."

"Yeah..." Matthew flushed, listening to the bubbles fizz as they tickled his nose. "He makes me happy too."

"Christ," he sighed once he'd downed a few more gulps. "You two make me sick." Though what was making him even more sick was this smile on his face. The door clicking open prompted him to turn around just in time to see his brother slip inside, hands working at the knot keeping his smock in place.

"What he means," Feliciano said, "is that he's glad for the both of you."

"Shut up. You don't speak for me."

"Of course not," he said, shrugging his shoulders. His smile was a little too wide as he pulled his dirty smock over his neck. "But you didn't say I was wrong, did you?"

Matthew's chuckling caught him off guard and he huffed, because he really wasn't as interested in this as he was coming across. At least that's what he liked to tell himself. Feliciano snickered at the unique shade of red on his brother's face.

"Take your fancy spring water before I pour it down the drain." He threw the bottle at Feliciano, who clumsily caught it with both hands. He stumbled back a bit to catch the little packet of pretzels that followed.

"A snack too?" Lovino wriggled half-heartedly between the pair of arms that came to squeeze him from behind, though he didn't exactly pull away. "I have such a nice big brother."

"Don't get used to it."

Feliciano sat on Matthew's other side, munching on his food and sighing about the tiny paint stain on his sleeve, which, apparently, he hadn't been able to scrub away in the bathroom sink. Lovino told him he was stupid to wear white that day, followed by some mumbling

about how he'd stain treat it once they got home. All Matthew could do was smile at how content both seemed to be, even in their bickering.

Out in the hallway, doors began to click shut. The old janitor was sweeping his way from one classroom to the next, bristles hitting the floor in a lazy kind of rhythm. Matthew began to hear the obnoxious squeaking of sneakers; the varsity kids were leaving practice. The building was closing down, and soon they'd be leaving too. And this little room would be waiting for them.

Matthew smiled, chin resting in the palm of his hand as he declared, "Next time, drinks are on me."

Ashes

Chapter Summary

> Gilbert's past revisits him on a day he least expects it, and it reignites feelings he'd rather not acknowledge.

⋰ ⋮⁘⋱⋮

Gilbert was an absolute mess, and the dog running back and forth between his legs was only making it even more so. Mumbling to himself, he paced hurriedly around his room, making sure he wasn't leaving anything behind. He wasn't exactly sure of what today would bring, but there was no doubt in his mind that once he made it out the front door, he'd be in no rush to come back.

He patted at his back pocket as Aster made another circle around him, satisfied when he felt the bulge of his wallet. His phone buzzed from over on his nightstand, and he quickly snatched it up, dragging a hand down his face for having nearly forgotten it. It was merely an email notification, spam about some kind of fancy, overpriced chocolate, and so he slipped it in his other pocket, making his way to his closet. Aster followed.

"Aster, cut it out," he grumbled. The dog did as she was told and sat off to the side, though Gilbert couldn't help but laugh at the way her tail moved twice as fast as before. He struggled with his jacket for a few seconds before realizing that his arm wasn't going through because it was inside out, and, with a sigh, he reversed it and slipped it over his shoulders. Aster whimpered as he swiped his car keys from his desk.

"Aster," he sighed again, soft and affectionate, and kneeled down in front of her. She nuzzled into the fingers that ran along her head and behind her ears. "If I could take you with me, I would," he said, "but I don't think Matt and his folks would appreciate your fur all over their furniture." Aster perked up at the mention of her new best friend, tail swishing back and forth against his carpeted floor. "Yeah," Gilbert chuckled. "He misses you too." He smirked as he got to his feet. "Guess who gets a treat for being such a good sport?"

Aster barked and ran past him when he opened the door, and Gilbert just shook his head as he followed her down the hall. He figured he should let Ludwig know he was leaving before he headed downstairs, so he poked his head through his brother's cracked door as he passed by.

"Luuudchen," he called, in that sing-songy way he knew would drive his brother up a wall. Because he couldn't just leave without messing with him one last time. It'd be downright neglectful of him do anything less.

He opened the door just a tad more and found Ludwig sitting at the edge of his bed, back turned to him. He held his cell phone against his ear, and Gilbert's smile grew crooked as he leaned against the door, waiting for the inevitable mush that came from Ludwig whenever Feliciano was on the other end. Gilbert knew he was in for a treat, too, because today was Valentines Day.

"Yes, everything is going just fine on our end, really."

In the split second that it took Gilbert to realize that Feliciano wasn't on the other end, his smile vanished and a scowl came to take its place. Ludwig spoke softly, so absorbed in his conversation that he hadn't noticed Gilbert call out to him.

"We received your postcard in the mail a few days ago," Ludwig continued, and Gilbert nearly scoffed. "It reached us a little late because of all the snow we've been having lately. Did you know we're expecting a blizzard?" There was a pause before Ludwig continued. "Yes, it's projected to hit our area tomorrow morning and last through the weekend. They even canceled school yesterday and the day before." Another pause. "We'll be fine. What about there? I heard Berlin has been getting a lot of snow this year. Did you have any trouble with your flight back in?"

The German coming from Ludwig's lips began to blur together in Gilbert's mind, and Gilbert welcomed it, the words becoming muddled and distant. Only when Ludwig spoke to their father did Gilbert's own language sound so distorted, because Gilbert refused to listen to it. He hated listening to their ridiculous small talk, about the weather, about what they saw in the news, or how busy the week had been. He couldn't stand to listen to them talk like everything was normal.

It had been just the two of them in this house for nearly a year, and stupid postcards and phone calls would never change that. Ludwig was being manipulated, set up for disappointment, and he didn't even know it.

Gilbert's desire to leave grew more then, because he could feel his good mood dissipating, warping into something bitter. And he thanked God that he would be at Matthew's tonight because otherwise he'd have to sit through yet another one of those nights. Another night where he and Ludwig would eat quietly, tip-toeing around the obvious, and when they did converse, it would be with a contrived casualness, both acting as if they didn't know what was on each other's minds.

As they cleared their dishes from the table, Ludwig would glance over at Gilbert, and Gilbert would act like he didn't notice. Ludwig would stall for a few seconds more, and Gilbert would act like he didn't know what was coming next. And then, like always, Ludwig would tell him:

"Dad says hello."

And like always, Gilbert would grunt and head for the sink before he changed the subject. It was what they did every time their father called, twice a month, like clockwork. It was the routine they'd fallen into halfway through this summer's break, when Gilbert stopped taking his calls.

Five months had passed since he'd last talked to his father. It had been the middle of August and yet Gilbert could still remember the chill that ran through his body as he listened to his father through the receiver, telling him that he was sorry, that Opa was in the hospital, and that he wouldn't be coming home next week as he'd planned. He still remembered the way his mind reeled with question after question, how numb he felt when his father told him that Opa was going to be alright, that they would talk about this later.

"Later" came the next day, and by then the numbness Gilbert felt was replaced with anger. He and Ludwig listened to their father's explanations, but Gilbert could only listen to so much before he lashed out, said things he knew would smart and sting, and shoved the phone into Ludwig's hand like it was worthless.

That had been their last conversation, and Gilbert couldn't find it in him to feel anything other than justified. He was sick of being treated like a clueless child, and if it took another five months of dead air for his father to understand that, then so be it.

By now Ludwig knew better than to say much more than those three words, and these days Gilbert's usual retorts were replaced by mere noises of indifference. Because neither of them wanted another night to end in arguments, nor to sit through the next morning's breakfast in uncomfortable silence. It had been a while that they'd argued like that, and Gilbert wanted it to stay that way.

Because after all, Ludwig was the only reason why this house didn't feel as empty as it actually was, and Gilbert didn't know what he would do if there ever came a day when his brother stopped accepting his apologies.

Slowly he exhaled, no longer in the mood for pestering, and he made for the stairs. His fingers curled around his car keys as he shoved his hands into the pockets, and the jingling sound reassured him that he'd be pulling out of the driveway soon. And that was all that mattered. He wasn't going to let thoughts of what used to be ruin what already was. He had plans today, plans he'd been looking forward to all week, and as far as he was concerned, anything else that didn't involve those plans weren't worth even a sliver of his attention. Except maybe his spoiled dog. He smirked as he heard a bark from downstairs.

"Yeah, yeah, I'm coming."

Gilbert peered out the window as Aster washed down her favorite biscuit with a few laps of water. The snow was really coming down. He'd had to scrape the ice off his front windshield after he checked the mail that morning, but now it looked like he hadn't done much of anything, the ice replaced by thick sheets of snow. He wasn't particularly excited about the bad drivers he'd have to share the road with, but the journey didn't matter nearly as much as the destination. And hopefully not many other people were trying to outrun a blizzard.

"Gilbert."

He turned around to find Ludwig coming into the kitchen, phone still in his hand. Gilbert noticed that his other hand was covering the receiver. "Yeah?" he asked warily, eyes shifting from the phone to his brother's face. He looked a bit flustered, and Gilbert had a feeling of what he might say next.

“Not interested,” he said, not wanting Ludwig to waste his breath. He pulled his keys from his pocket and made for the front door. “I gotta go. Snow’s picking up.”

“Wait.” Gilbert frowned as Ludwig put a hand on his shoulder to stop him. “It’s Elise,” he said.

“Elise?” Gilbert just kind of stood there, dumbfounded, the little traces of irritation disappearing from his face. He looked again at the phone and then back up to Ludwig, brows scrunched together in uncertainty. “Lili’s there?”

“Yes,” sighed Ludwig, a small smile reaching his lips. “She’s staying with Dad for the weekend. She wants to speak with you. Do you want to keep her waiting?”

He cleared his throat, setting his keys gently on the counter. Ludwig handed him the phone before whistling at Aster to follow him, and she did, tail wagging as she did so. Gilbert stared down at the phone and did his best to ignore the word "dad" on the screen as he brought it to his ear.

“Hello?”

“Gilbert!” answered his cousin on the other end, and Gilbert could’ve sworn he was dreaming. She hadn't even been able to correctly pronounce his name the last time he’d seen her.

“Lili,” he said, wandering into the living room, just because he needed somewhere comfortable to sit down; he had a feeling this would be a long call. “Is that really you?”

“Yes, it’s me,” she giggled. “Why wouldn’t it be?”

Gilbert slowly sat himself down on the couch as he heard Elise laugh again, and he could only blink in his stupor. Her voice was high-pitched yet soft, and Gilbert was still trying to get used to it. It was strange to hear her speaking so clearly, and even stranger to hear her saying so many words at once, her vocabulary no longer that of a two year old’s.

“Gilbert?” she asked, somewhat timid. “Are you still there?”

Gilbert suddenly became aware of his silence, quickly answering, “I’m here, Lili. Sorry, I’m just...happy to hear your voice.”

“Really?”

Gilbert smiled as her tone perked back up. “Of course I am,” he said, a hand rubbing at his chin. “You...you sound so grown up.”

“I do?” she asked, voice full of wonder. “But I’m just nine.”

“God,” he said softly, more to himself than anything. “You were just a baby when I last saw you.”

“Yes,” she laughed, “I’m definitely not a baby anymore. Even though my big brother thinks I still am. Mama says he’s just, um…” She hummed as she struggled to remember the word her mother had taught her, and gave a little noise of discovery as the word finally came to her. “Overprotected.”

Gilbert smiled to himself, realizing that no matter how many years seemed to have flown by, and regardless of how much older she may have sounded, his cousin was still a young child, and she was still learning. “Overprotective, you mean.”

“Oh, yes, that’s right,” she answered, sheepish.

“Is Basch there with you, too?” he asked, sinking into the couch as old memories of his life in Berlin began to resurface.

His aunt had remarried just before the Beilschmidts left for the states, so Gilbert had only met Elise’s step brother twice, once at a Christmas dinner party, and once more at his aunt’s wedding. Being only seven at the time, Gilbert didn’t remember much about the wedding outside of the itchy tuxedo and the disgusting carrot cake, but he did recall how well Elise and Basch got along.

He remembered Basch being a quiet kid whose German sounded really weird. (It was Swiss German, his father would explain after he'd asked why.) Basch wasn't as talkative as him, which his overactive little mind had deemed “boring," but he was all smiles when Elise was around, giggling and babbling his name to an almost annoying degree. Somehow, even then Gilbert knew that Boring Basch would make a great older brother.

He picked a bit of lint from his jeans as he reminisced, thinking that Basch should be around his age now, if not older. And suddenly, he felt the strong urge to know. To know what the rest of his family was doing, and if talk of the Beilschmidts was still taboo at their dinner tables. Elise’s sweet voice brought him back before his thoughts pulled him in any deeper.

“No, he’s spending today with someone else.” She giggled, voice just a whisper as she added, “He has a date.”

“Oh,” Gilbert snorted. “I see.”

“Mama and Papa are going on a date tonight, too. They wanted to come to a fancy restaurant in Germany for Valentine’s Day. So that’s why I’m staying with Uncle Gerry and Grandpa Fritz! Berlin is much colder than Vaduz, but Grandpa makes me hot chocolate with lots of milk and cinnamon, and I have lots of warm blankets for my bed.”

“That’s great, Lili,” Gilbert said through a weakening smile, trying to ignore how heavy the phone in his hand had become. He gripped the phone tighter, licking his suddenly dry lips. It took nothing. Nothing but the mere mention of his grandfather’s name to feel himself slipping under again, those memories of what used to be coming back to consume him.

The taste of his grandfather’s hot chocolate, the one that never tasted quite the same when he made it himself. Those winters spent in front of the fireplace, fighting with Ludwig for a spot on his grandfather’s lap. His father prying his empty mug from his little fingers, and falling

asleep to the gentle sway of Grandpa Fritz's rocking chair. Gilbert wondered if that rocking chair was still there. Wondered if his father had ever fixed the little squeak that his grandfather always complained about. But most of all, he wondered if Old Fritz's coughing was getting any better, and if was really taking those morning strolls like his doctor had recommended.

"Gilbert?" Elise's voice had him floating to the top again.

"Yeah?" His voice was raspy, and he quickly cleared his throat. "I'm listening, *Mäuschen*."

"Do you have a special someone for Valentine's Day?"

The question, however innocent, still caught Gilbert off guard, and he fiddled with the TV remote next to him, face growing warm. "I do."

"Is she pretty?"

His flush grew more intense. "Ah, well, it's—"

He was interrupted by the sound of distant barking, and he heard scuffling noises as if she were fiddling with the phone.

"Blackie, Berlitz," she whined. "I can't hear Gilbert." There were some more scuffled noises followed by Elise's laughter. "I'll play with you later, okay?"

Gilbert smiled, and had to stop himself from asking all the things he thought about at night before he fell asleep. Did Blackie's coat still shine like black glass? Did he still like pig's ears? Did Berlitz still cower during thunderstorms, and did she still pester everyone she met for belly rubs?

Would they even recognize him anymore?

But he knew Elise wouldn't have the answers, and a part of him wasn't so sure he wanted them after all, so instead he asked, "How are they? Blackie and Berlitz."

"Oh, they're good," said Elise. "They're just playing with each other." She gasped as if remembering something. "I heard Aster when I was talking to Ludwig! Uncle Gerry says Blackie and Berlitz really miss her."

Gilbert suppressed the urge to scoff. The nerve of him to say that when he was the one to separate them. "Oh, did he?"

"Mmhm. Do you think Aster misses them too?"

"I know she does," he replied. "She would love it if you could tell them that."

"I will, I promise. But you have to tell Aster that they miss her too, okay?"

Her innocence shined through in every word that she spoke, and though he knew she'd meant well, he couldn't help the feeling of sadness that came over him. But he smiled through it,

because it didn’t feel as bad that way. “Okay, *Mäuschen*.”

“Aww,” she sighed. “I have to go now. It’s almost dinner time, so I have to take my bath. If I don’t get in now, I won’t have time to help make the brownies!”

“Well, well,” he said with a grin. “I wouldn’t wanna miss that either. Better hop to it.”

“Okay,” she said. “Um, if it’s alright, can I call you and Ludwig again? I want to know more about what America is like!”

“Sure can. Anytime you want.” He laughed as the girl gave a celebratory squeal. Just when Gilbert thought she couldn’t get any cuter. “Hey, Lili, before you go…”

“Yes?”

“Could you pass the phone to Grandpa for me?” he asked. He wasn't expecting more than a quick hello, but even that would suffice. The old man couldn't avoid his phone calls forever.

Gilbert’s grandfather was very old fashioned when it came to keeping in touch, and much preferred snail mail over phone calls. He wouldn't even touch email, despite the many times Gilbert had argued in its favor. It would reach him faster, he’d said, and they could talk more often. Old Man Fritz hadn't been sold though. What was a few more days of waiting, he’d replied during one of their short phone calls, when he could receive something tangible from his grandsons? Touch something that his grandsons had also held between their fingers. See the distinctions in their handwriting and the way in which they narrated their own lives. They weren't just letters, they were gifts, pieces of his grandsons that had made it back to Germany.

After that twenty-minute phone call, the longest they'd ever had, Gilbert never brought it up again. Because he enjoyed the letters too, even if writing them took a bit longer than it would have with a keyboard. Because he loved reading his grandfather’s feathery cursive script, nothing short of calligraphy. And he loved the little pieces of his childhood that fell out of each envelope, dried summer flowers and packets of tea and sugary hard candies. Even if it was just for a few minutes, Gilbert would be grateful. He just wanted to hear the old man's voice, see if it was still as raspy as it was the last he'd heard it. Because his grandfather could write whatever he wanted, about how he was doing fine, about how his last check-up had gone well, but Gilbert’s ears would tell him no lies.

“Oh,” Elise answered, “Grandpa’s still napping.”

Gilbert frowned. “Napping? And it’s almost dinner time?”

“Yes, Grandpa was feeling a little tired today, so he took a late nap,” Elise explained.

“Oh.” Gilbert squeezed at his knee, lips pressed into a line. Shit. “I see.”

“Oh, but Uncle’s in the kitchen. I’ll go get him for you!”

Gilbert stiffened. “No, Lili, wait—”

But Elise didn't hear him, presumably already on her way to the kitchen. Gilbert sat there frozen with the phone against his ear, listening to Berlitz and Blackie bark in the background, and to the little thumps of Elise's feet hitting the floor as she hurried along. Then came the clinking and clanking of pots and pans. And he couldn't move. No matter how much he wanted to hurl the phone to the ground, he couldn't. Not even as heard Elise say, "It's Gilbert!"

He heard her hand off the phone, followed by a short silence. And then, "...Gilbert?"

Gilbert's hand grew clammy and cold around the phone in his hand as his father's voice reached him. After all these months Gilbert had spent ignoring his calls, refusing to speak to him, he'd expected to hear some sort of bitterness, something stoic and flat, his punishment for being the difficult, disobedient one. But it was still so warm, with that slight husk that came with age.

And Gilbert swallowed as he heard his name again, laced with concern. He stared at the ground, his heart racing, fingers gripping the arm of the couch because he couldn't understand why. *Why* was his father not angry with him? Gilbert couldn't even *think* of him without getting frustrated, without wanting to claw at something, and yet his father spoke his name with such care. It made him feel like shit.

"Please say something," he said softly.

But Gilbert couldn't. Not until his father shouted at him, told him how selfish and ungrateful he was, anything that would justify all this time he'd spent throwing postcards in the trash, letting weeks and months pass without so much as a "hello." He wanted to be validated. He wanted someone other than himself to tell him that he was right, that he was right to feel the way he felt, and that he wasn't just a rebellious teenager going through some phase.

"Gilbert—"

He hung up, angrily wiping away the wetness from his eyes. All those vicious things he had wanted to say, all those things that he'd sworn he'd say the next time he spoke to his father, were like ashes on his tongue. This was what his father was good at, manipulating his emotions so that *he* was the one who felt guilty. His father's voice was all it had taken, and he hated it.

Ludwig froze where he stood as he came into the living room some minutes later, alarmed to see the state of his brother, elbows against his knees, hands buried in his hair. Gilbert looked up as his name was called, and wanted to melt into the ground as Ludwig asked him what was wrong, worry etched into every facial feature.

"Nothing," he replied, swiping Ludwig's phone from the coffee table and quickly getting to his feet. "Here." Gilbert placed the phone in Ludwig's hand and tried to ignore the way his brother was looking at him.

Ludwig slipped it into his pocket as Gilbert passed him and made for the kitchen, Ludwig following quickly behind. "Gilbert."

“What?” he said, grabbing his keys from the counter.

“Did you—”

“Did I what?” he snapped. “Talk to Dad? No, I didn’t fucking talk to him.” Ludwig frowned as he stood there, but otherwise stayed silent. Gilbert looked away, bringing a hand to his face. “I couldn’t, okay?”

“Okay,” Ludwig answered, the single word assuring the other he wouldn’t press him any further.

“I’m—” he sighed, looking up from the tile floor to his brother, meeting his eyes because he wanted Ludwig to know he was sincere. “I’m sorry. I didn't mean to yell at you.”

“I know,” said Ludwig. “It’s alright.” And yet Gilbert couldn't help the stab of guilt that pierced through his relief, because his brother was so forgiving, and he didn't deserve it. Ludwig grabbed one of the apples sitting in the basket on the countertop and turned on the tap, rinsing it beneath the gentle stream. “At least tell me you enjoyed your talk with Lili.” He smiled as he heard Gilbert laugh.

“Yeah,” he said, leaning back against the counter, hand slipping into his pockets. “I honestly can’t believe she remembers us. I mean, did you hear her, Lud? Speaking actual words?” He shook his head and sighed wistfully. “God, I feel old. The last time we saw her she wasn’t even potty trained.” He gave a sudden laugh. “You cried at her second birthday party because she threw up on your shirt, remember?”

Ludwig smiled wryly and bit into his apple, swallowing before he said, “I remember.” He remembered it distinctly, their father carrying him to the bathroom, scrubbing at his shirt as he sat on the toilet. *She didn’t mean to, Ludchen, she’s just a baby*, he remembered their father saying, voice gentle and reassuring. Ludwig was old enough to know that she hadn’t done it on purpose, but the smell and feel of regurgitated milk seeping into his shirt wasn’t the most pleasant. “You snuck me an extra scoop of ice cream to make me feel better.”

Gilbert laughed again, more softly this time, and a silence settled between the two, both losing themselves in their shared nostalgia. Ludwig was staring at the bite mark in his apple when Gilbert broke the silence. He looked over to him as he spoke.

“I asked Lili to hand the phone to Opa, but she said he was napping.”

There was a considerate pause before Ludwig answered, “Dad told me that too.” Gilbert’s eyes had returned to the floor, and Ludwig’s, back to his apple. “He...said that Opa’s been feeling very fatigued lately.”

“No shit.” Gilbert said, but his words were void of any malice. Instead, they rang hollow. “The man needs a goddamn oxygen tank to breathe.”

“Gilbert...he—”

“He has good days and bad days, I know.” He’d read the old man’s letter. The only letter in which he’d written more than a vague “fine” in regards to his health. “But what are we gonna do when the bad days outnumber the good?”

Would their father wait to call them until *after* he was dead? Gilbert wouldn’t put it past him. After all, their father had waited until just last year to tell them about just how sick their grandfather actually was. But that was just how their father was. Telling them everything after the fact. Leaving things unsaid because they were “too young,” because they “wouldn’t have understood,” because he didn’t want to “hurt” them. Well, thought Gilbert, it was much too late for that.

The deafening silence that followed Gilbert’s question, the one Ludwig had no answer for, was broken by the doorbell ringing. Aster, who had been lounging by the foot of the sink, barked and ran for the door.

“Feli,” Ludwig said with a start. They glanced at each other for a split second, a mutual agreement that they’d finish this conversation later, and Ludwig hurried for the door.

Gilbert dug out his car keys from his pocket, half-listening to Ludwig and Feliciano exchange words. Ludwig was scolding Feliciano for not wearing a scarf or gloves. Feliciano said he was fine, that he was just down the street so why did it matter, but Ludwig disagreed, said it was careless of him. What if he got sick? There was a stretch of silence then, sounds of lips connecting, of whispered sweet nothings, and Gilbert stayed put for a bit longer to let them have their moment uninterrupted. Then he cleared his throat louder than was necessary, and made his entrance.

“Well,” he said, a smirk on his lips, “I guess that’s my cue to leave.” He jingled his keys for effect. “I’ve got a pretty little birdie to see.”

“Gil!” Feliciano beamed at him as Ludwig helped him out of his coat. “Happy Valentines Day!”

“Yeah, back ‘atcha,” he said, grabbing his backpack from where he’d left it at the door.

“You’re going to Matthew’s now?” Gilbert answered with a hum and a nod. “Be careful, okay? It’s getting pretty bad out there.”

“Let us know when you arrive,” Ludwig said, smiling as he added, “And tell Matthew I said hello.”

“Will do, Mom and Dad,” he chuckled, quickly slipping out the front door.

Gilbert made it to his car slower than he would’ve liked, crunching through snow and making sure not to slip up and fall on the icy driveway. He gave a large sigh of relief as he plopped himself behind the wheel and slammed the door shut, jamming the key into the ignition for some semblance of warmth.

Even after cranking the heat dial up as high as it would go, the heat seemed to trickle out at an almost torturous pace, but Gilbert found reprieve in the fact that his cheeks weren't

stinging anymore. He flipped on his wipers to clear the ice that had reformed on his windshield, leaning back against the headrest with another sigh. His eyes settled on the front door as he crossed his arms at his chest, his father's words still echoing in the back of his mind. He shook his head, hands gripping at the wheel. His father wasn't going to ruin this day for him. He was going to see Matthew, and nothing else mattered.

He took out his phone, thumb swiping across the screen, and tapped Matthew's name. And he listened as it rang, once, twice. And then, "Morning, Gil."

And for the slightest of moments, Gilbert allowed himself to forget. To forget about his frustration, his confusion, his guilt. About all the parts of his life that he pretended weren't real. He sunk back into his seat, Matthew's voice, slightly raspy from sleep, bringing a smile to his face.

"Hey, Mattie," he said, adjusting his rearview mirror. "Guess what?"

It was a shame that he wouldn't see the look on Matthew's face at what he said next, but hearing his reaction was the next best thing.

So Fucking Much

Chapter Summary

> There was a world that existed outside of each other’s arms, but neither Matthew nor Gilbert seemed to care.

.:̇ .:̈:̇.̈:̇ .:̇ .:̈:̇.

Matthew had never sprung from his bed this quickly in all his life. He'd just barely managed to shimmy into his slippers before he left his room, and although something about what he’d just done felt not quite right, it didn't matter because the doorbell was on its second ring, and Matthew had yet to make it down the stairs. He'd come upstairs just to keep himself from pacing around the house, but of course as soon as he'd managed to regain some semblance of calm, he'd heard Gilbert's car pull into the driveway. With his heart now in his throat, he turned the corner and started down the stairs, hoping Gilbert wouldn't freeze to death before he made it to the bottom.

"I'm coming!" he called out, gripping at the rail as he went down. It was at this point that Matthew realized that he’d put his slippers on the wrong feet, making his journey down much more difficult than it needed to be. He could take a few seconds to fix it, but the winds outside were screeching and howling in a way he’d never heard before, and he feared he’d open the door to find Gilbert had been carried away by Mother Nature herself.

The Bonnefoy staircase had exactly twenty-seven steps, and Matthew quickly counted each one in his head as he hurried down, a little trick he’d taught himself in first grade. Still, it seemed like an eternity before he made it to the front door, color painting his cheeks as he fumbled with the lock. Gilbert was a block of ice by now, Matthew was sure of it. He slipped the lock from its notch, hearing but not really listening to the TV playing at the other end of the room.

The cold wasted no time rushing inside as he opened the door, nipping at Matthew’s face and tousling his hair. But Matthew didn't mind it one bit, because it made Gilbert's hug twice as warm. Gilbert quickly shut the door before pulling Matthew into him, and Matthew sucked in a breath when Gilbert's forehead touched his own. "You're freezing," he laughed.

"What are you talking about?" Gilbert scoffed, grinning as he squeezed Matthew in his arms. "I've always been this cool."

Matthew snorted and immediately hated himself for it. Nothing good ever came from encouraging Gilbert's dorky puns. "Seriously?”

“Did I lie?”

“Get out.”

"Aw, c'mon," Gilbert cackled as Matthew pretended to push him away. "You've gotta give me props for that one. That was totally on the fly."

Matthew could only shake his head, and Gilbert couldn’t help but notice a rogue snowflake that had snuck its way into Matthew’s wind-tousled hair. “God, you haven’t even been here five minutes and—“

Matthew’s breath caught in his throat, lips parted for words that would never make their way out. Gilbert's fingers were in his hair, coaxing it gently behind his ear, and as Gilbert's thumb brushed against his cheek, he shivered, goosebumps spreading along his neck.

"And I've already got you laughing for me."

Gilbert looked at Matthew's face, flushed a deep red, and was convinced that there was no other person on this planet that could wear that color so well. He could feel that same color tinging his ears, and this time the cold wasn't to blame. Slowly, gently, he captured Matthew’s lips in a soft kiss. His own lips were a bit chapped from the cold, but any insecurity he might have been feeling melted away when he felt Matthew smile against him, felt the warmth of Matthew’s hand against his frozen cheek.

Not even a second after Matthew broke the kiss were his arms around Gilbert’s neck, voice muffled in Gilbert’s scarf as he said, “I’m so glad you got here safe.”

What was normally a fifteen-minute drive had taken Gilbert twice the time, and so naturally Matthew had started to imagine the worst. The only reason he hadn't called was because if there was anything worse than driving in a snowstorm, it was talking on the phone while driving in a snowstorm.

“Told you I would.” He smirked as Matthew pulled away. “And you told me not to come.”

“You just drove through a *blizzard*!” he said, sounding as if he still couldn’t believe that Gilbert was standing in his living room. “Of course I told you not to come.”

Gilbert gave a little shrug, taking off his backpack and placing it by the door. “It’s technically not a blizzard yet.”

“Blizzard, winter storm, same difference,” Matthew sighed. “You really could’ve gotten yourself hurt. There’s a reason why they’ve been telling everyone to stay off the roads.”

“Yeah, well, you never would’ve let me come if I’d told you yesterday.” Gilbert chuckled a bit as he remembered their phone conversation from just a half hour ago. Matthew had answered his question with the only acceptable response.

“What?”

“I'm on my way to your place.”

Matthew had shouted a frantic “What?” into the receiver, followed by a mish-mash of Franglish and Matthew’s demands that he turn around. In the end, Matthew had found himself sitting alone at the kitchen island with a bowl of half-eaten Cheerios, Gilbert’s parting words of “See you soon, *Vögelchen*,” echoing in his ears.

And now Gilbert was here, and in one piece, and Matthew was so relieved that it felt as if his limbs were becoming jello. He plopped down on the arm of the couch and gave another sigh, the sound one of mild exasperation.

“Of course I wouldn’t have! Have you even seen what they've been saying on the news?” He pointed in the general direction of the TV, which was no longer showing programming from the local weather station, but instead a tampon commercial. His point still stood.

Gilbert rolled his eyes as he stripped himself of his heavy layers, first his hat, scarf, and gloves, then his coat. “Who hasn't? It's all they've been talking about for the past two weeks.”

“Well, for once they aren't exaggerating. We haven’t gotten this much snow in *ten whole years*, Gilbert.”

“Yeah, I got that the first twenty times they said it.” Gilbert said, slipping off his snow-caked boots and leaving them on the doormat to dry.

Matthew made a face. "But you still went and did the exact opposite of what they've been telling people to do."

"It's more fun being a rebel," said Gilbert, placing his coat on the rack by the door.

"*Seriously*, Gilbert," Matthew huffed. "What if you had hit a patch of black ice, or broke down on the side of the road somewhere? You don't just go out driving in the middle of a snowstorm!"

"You do when it's the first time in your whole life you've actually had a valentine." He approached the couch, stopping only when he was directly in front of Matthew. "I was always planning on spending today with you with or without this damn storm." He watched Matthew’s face redden as he added, "Fuss at me all you want, but it won't change the fact that I'm happy as shit you're in front of me right now."

"Gil..."

"*Seriously*, Matthew," he said, mouth twitching up into a smirk. "You don't just spend Valentine's Day alone in your empty house freezing your ass off. Not when you've got someone to freeze your ass off with." Matthew’s fingers dug into the arm of the couch as he felt Gilbert’s face close in mere inches from his own. "Wanna yell at me some more?”

Matthew’s fingers dug deeper as Gilbert snaked an arm around his waist, face burning as he mumbled, “Shut up.”

“I think you meant ‘Happy Valentines Day.’”

“No,” said Matthew, bringing an arm around Gilbert’s neck, “I meant shut up.” Gilbert was more than happy to oblige when Matthew’s lips pressed against his. Once, long and firm. And again, chaste and yet no less tender. “You really scared me,” he said. The fact that he'd sat in front of the TV for the past hour listening to how terrible the roads were definitely hadn't made waiting for the doorbell to ring any easier.

“Sorry,” Gilbert said, bringing his other arm around Matthew, “Didn’t mean to.”

“But I’m glad you’re here.”

“Me too.”

Gilbert took in the smile on Matthew’s face, the smile that made driving like an elderly person absolutely worth it. He took Matthew's hand, lacing their fingers, and Matthew frowned slightly at how cold he was. "You're still so cold." Gilbert smiled as Matthew's hand came to his cheek. "Even your face."

"Well, it *is* below zero outside."

"Do you want some hot chocolate? We could make some. We have a ton of it in the kitchen. Oh, and I can bring you a blanket from upstairs, and an extra robe if you want it. We can turn up the space heater too; I don't think it's on the highest setting. Here." Gilbert frowned as Matthew stood suddenly, the warmth of Matthew's palm gone. "I'll go get you a blanket." But Matthew stopped short when Gilbert gripped his hand again, pulling him back.

"I know where the blankets are. I can get it myself."

"Okay, well, I can go dig out the hot chocolate while you do that," he said, and made to leave for the kitchen. Gilbert stopped him again, this time with a more forceful tug of the hand. Gilbert plopped himself down on the couch, taking Matthew down right with him. Matthew gasped as he fell onto Gilbert, hands braced against the other's chest. He laughed when Gilbert's arms came round to squeeze him, a bit too tight for comfort. "Gil, what are you doing?"

"Matt, I'm cold, not dying. Relax."

Matthew smiled sheepishly. "Sorry."

"Besides," he smiled, loosening his grip once Matthew had relaxed against him. "Why do I need a blanket when I've got you?"

Matthew laughed, cheeks warming despite himself. "That was super cheesy."

"Doesn't make it not true." He watched Matthew smile and shake his head and gave a contented sigh as one of Matthew's hands began to play in his hair. A comfortable silence fell between them, the TV still playing in the background. The news anchor was urging people at home to make a checklist of emergency storm supplies. He only half-listened to it, instead focusing on how good Matthew's fingertips felt against his scalp. Matthew's voice was soft against his ears when he next spoke.

"Did you…pack extra clothes?" he asked.

"*Natürlich*." Gilbert smirked. "This is gonna be a hell of a first sleepover."

"Yeah." Matthew flushed. Today was Friday. This storm was going to last until Sunday morning. He and Gilbert would be shut in for two whole days. Gilbert would be staying with him for two whole days and tonight when he closed his eyes, Gilbert would still be there. The thought sent a sudden rush through his body, made his heart beat a little faster. "Yeah," he said again, though it was more so to himself, a verbal confirmation that yes, this was real, and no, he wasn't dreaming. He snapped out of his daze when Gilbert whispered a soft "hey," running a thumb along his cheek.

"I just want you to know that me sleeping over doesn't change a thing, okay? It being Valentine's Day *still* doesn't change anything."

"Okay," Matthew said, chest fluttering with a mixture of relief and embarrassment. The former because he still wasn't sure if he was ready to go all the way. Because *God*, Gilbert was so incredibly patient and understanding of his anxieties surrounding sex. The latter because he apparently hadn't been very good at hiding that sex was exactly what was on his mind.

"Whatever we do, I want you to be comfortable. And I want you to tell me when you're not. Same as always, alright?"

Matthew nodded. "Yeah." He pulled his hand from Gilbert's hair, bringing it to cup his face, no longer cold.

Matthew fought back the urge to thank him, as he'd done the first time they had this conversation. It had been just a few days after Gilbert had met his parents. Gilbert had apologized first, said he'd made Matthew uncomfortable with what he'd said at dinner that night and that he was sorry. What he'd said that night was true, Gilbert told him, Matthew meant so much more to him than just sex, and he never wanted Matthew to feel pressured or uncomfortable. Matthew had thanked him and Gilbert had responded by telling him not to, telling him that being comfortable and open with each other about sex was what any two people in a healthy relationship should be doing. Could he really call himself Matthew's boyfriend, say he cared for Matthew, Gilbert had asked, if Matthew didn't feel comfortable enough with him to talk about things like this? When Gilbert put it that way, it made thanking him feel like an insult, though Gilbert had neither said nor suggested such a thing. So no, he wasn't going to thank Gilbert. At least not aloud.

Gilbert felt his cheeks heat as Matthew leaned forward, lips pressing firmly against his. The kiss was long, loving, and Gilbert couldn't help sighing into it. He opened his eyes as Matthew pulled away, his heart quickening when Matthew's hands came to rest on his shoulders. And again, he leaned in, capturing his lips in yet another kiss. And another. And another. Gilbert kissed back just as eagerly, hands at Matthew's lower back. He groaned when Matthew's tongue found his bottom lip. Each time Matthew did that, it reminded him of the first time they'd done this, how red Matthew's face had been afterwards, as if he hadn't believed he'd just used his tongue in such a way. That sheepishness was long gone now, and

Gilbert swore he could feel himself become putty as he let Matthew in, his tongue tasting of something sweet.

And he began to feel it. The warm, sharp tingle of arousal. The rushing of blood. His shortening breaths. When Matthew pulled away, he willed himself to open his eyes, lids heavy. He gulped at the sight of Matthew's face, cheeks flushed, lips plump and moist with saliva. It was a sight he'd seen quite a number of times, and yet each time it still left him feeling absolutely intoxicated. Yet even in his haze he noticed that Matthew looked as if he wanted to say something, but wasn't. But before Gilbert could ask what was on Matthew's mind, a loud buzzing noise sounded to Gilbert's left. He glanced over, finding Matthew's cellphone rumbling against the coffee table.

"Sorry," Matthew said as Gilbert leaned over to grab it for him. "That's…definitely my dad." He could tell from the pattern of the vibrations, quick and short, each little buzz seemingly more urgent than the last. Matthew had set it that way for a reason; the majority of the time his dad called him, it was to fuss and worry about something usually not worth fussing and worrying about. "Calling to check on me after he said he wouldn't."

To his father's credit, he'd only sent Matthew three text messages since leaving two days ago, which was pretty incredible considering how panicked he must've been. But then again, now that Matthew thought about it, that was probably because his Papa had been keeping him away from his phone for as long as he could manage. Clearly his Papa had lost the battle today.

Gilbert laughed at the way Matthew rolled his eyes. "It's fine," he said, handing Matthew his phone. "I've got you to myself for two whole days. Let your old man know you're still alive." Matthew chuckled, squirming a bit as Gilbert placed a kiss on the ticklish spot near his collarbone. "I'll go start on the hot chocolate."

"Okay." Matthew smiled as Gilbert left for the kitchen, tapping twice on his touchscreen to pick up the phone. "Hi, Dad," he said, a wry smile on his face.

"Hello, dear. Now, I know I said I wouldn't call—"

"You did say that."

"Yes, I know and I'm sorry. I just—it's getting awfully ugly outside and I just wanted to make sure you're still doing alright." Matthew could hear a loud, distant whirring noise in the background as Arthur spoke. "Are you keeping warm?"

"Yes, Dad," he sighed softly, not bothering to hide his exasperation. "I'm fine. I told you not to worry about me. You should be enjoying your time with Papa."

"I know," Arthur said, "And I am. It's just that if I'd known this bloody storm would be this bad, I'd've made your father book us somewhere closer to home."

"Dad, it's called a 'romantic getaway' for a reason. Staying close to home would've defeated the whole purpose."

For Valentine's Day this year Francis and Arthur had decided to do something they'd never done before and book a hotel suite for the weekend. When they'd left town two days ago, there had been quite a bit of snow, but the winds were virtually nonexistent and at least then the city snowplows could manage to keep the roads relatively clear. Now, it was a totally different story. Matthew listened to the windows creak under the pressure of the gusts whipping outside.

"I suppose."

"Does Papa know you're calling me right now?"

There was a shuffling noise, as if Arthur was readjusting his grip on the phone. He coughed. "Clearly not. Old git is preoccupied with his hair at the moment." Matthew couldn't help smiling; he thought that was a hairdryer he was hearing. He wondered how many new grey hairs his Papa had found this time, and how long Arthur had spent teasing him about being an old man. "But anyway, you're sure you're alright? You know where to find the spare blankets if—"

"Didn't I tell you to stop worrying?"

"Right, right, okay." He heard his dad sigh into the receiver. "I guess I'd just feel a little more at ease if you weren't alone."

"But I'm not. Gilbert's here." Matthew flushed as soon as the words left his lips. Not because he hadn't wanted to say it, but because he'd said it so casually, so matter-of-factly, like Gilbert was supposed to have been here with him all along. Like Gilbert hadn't just showed up on his doorstep in the middle of freaking Snowmageddon. He held in a sigh as his father began to respond, not really in the mood to answer the twenty questions that were bound to follow.

"What? How on earth—"

"He just...showed up twenty minutes ago. Drove here, even though I told him not to."

"My God, is he okay?"

Matthew suddenly heard his Papa's voice cut in from the background. "Is who okay?"

"Gilbert. He just showed up at the house." Matthew then heard more shuffling, followed by Arthur telling him he was on speakerphone.

"Matthieu? Gilbert is with you? Is he alright? Are *you* alright?"

"I'm fine, Papa. He's fine too." He chuckled softly. "Stupid but fine. He's safe, I'm safe, we're both safe and you two have nothing to worry about, ok? He's in the kitchen making us hot chocolate now."

"This must mean it was your father who did the calling," Francis said, his tone accusatory yet playful. "Since you seem to be perfectly calm."

Before Matthew could confirm his suspicions, Arthur scoffed, as if to make a rebuttal, but instead all that followed was a sigh of surrender. "Alright," he said, "no more calls after this one. That's a promise to you both. Especially now that I know Gilbert is there with you."

"How long has he been there?" asked Francis. "I still can't believe he managed to make it there without incident." It wasn't as if the Bonnefoy home was insanely far from Gibert's, but in this weather, it simply didn't matter.

"I can't really either, Papa. He got here about twenty minutes ago."

"Well, stupid is right," Arthur said, and it might've sounded harsh to a person less privy to Arthur Kirkland's expressions of affection, but Matthew knew it was coming from a place of concern for Gilbert's well-being. "He could've seriously injured himself trying to drive through all this."

"That's exactly what I said, but he acted like it was no big deal."

"Well, maybe not for him. What is the saying, *cher*? Love will make you do crazy things?"

Arthur made an amused sound. "Well, it certainly explains why I decided to marry you, now doesn't it?"

"Delighted to see we're on the same page."

Matthew flushed, his reaction a mixture of embarrassment and admiration. Because while he could certainly do without listening to his parents flirt with each other over the phone, it was yet another reminder of the love his parents had for one another, of how strong that bond between them had remained, even after all these years.

"Are you happy that he's there?" Francis asked suddenly.

Matthew's blush deepened. He could hear Gilbert singing in the kitchen, badly, and held back laughter. "Of course I am."

"Then maybe it wasn't such a stupid thing of him to do after all." Matthew could only smile in response. "You two have fun."

"And be safe." Arthur added. "Show Gilbert where we keep the emergency supplies. And I trust you'll grab a few extra rubbers from our room if you need to."

"Dad!"

"He shouldn't need to, *cher*, I gave him plenty."

"Okay, I'm hanging up now, love you both, bye!"

Matthew groaned and tossed his phone to the other end of the couch. God, sometimes his parents were unbelievable.

His attention was brought back to Gilbert's solo concert in the next room over, and he found himself smiling again. He got to his feet and crossed the room, smirking as he entered the kitchen. "You know, you're still not very good at that," he said, seating himself at the island.

Gilbert turned around from where he stood at the stove to see his boyfriend sitting smugly across from him, hand propped under his chin as he leaned forward on the table.

"Oh yeah?" He replied, taking a few steps forward before rounding the corner of the island.

"Yeah."

Gilbert looked from the teasing smile on Matthew's face to his feet dangling a few inches from the floor, his own lips curling at one side. "Well, your shoes are on backwards." He'd noticed a while ago as he was slipping himself out of his coat, but hadn't said anything, thinking Matthew would fix it on his own time. But now, with Matthew acting all coy, looking all cute in his sweatshirt and flannel bottoms, he just couldn't resist.

Matthew scoffed as Gilbert pecked his nose, cheeks coloring as he said, "I knew that. I just forgot to fix them."

"Sure, kid," Gilbert said, sauntering back over to the stove. He turned down the burner he was using and poured a cup of milk into the saucepan, the rich brown liquid lightening in color.

"Jerk," Matthew said, quickly putting each slipper on the correct foot. "You know that stuff's microwaveable, right?"

"So is a potato," he replied. "But why would you if you don't have to?"

Matthew shrugged. "'Cause it's faster."

"True," said Gilbert, turning down the burner a few more notches until it reached the lowest possible temperature. It was finished now; he just had to keep it warm. "But like I said, I've got two whole days with you." He glanced up at the microwave that sat overhead the stove, pleased to discover that it was only a few minutes after ten. To realize that for the first time ever, he wouldn't need to keep checking the time. "For once we don't have to rush. You know?"

Matthew smiled as Gilbert placed an empty mug down in front of him. "Yeah...thank you."

"Now, I've got an idea."

"What's that?" asked Matthew, fingers tapping against the mug, a smirk on his face because he smelled mischief.

"We get every single pillow in this house, a shit ton of blankets, and bring them downstairs."

"And why would we do that?"

"So we can build a pillow fort."

“A what?” Matthew burst into laughter.

“Don’t tell me you’ve never built one before.”

“I mean, yeah, when I was like, eight. And Alfred did most of the building. I mostly kept knocking things over.”

Gilbert grinned. “Well then help me knock things over. It’ll get built eventually. I’m on pillows, you get the blankets. Come on.”

“W-Wait!” Matthew giggled as Gilbert pulled him from his chair. “We’re doing it now?”

“Hell yeah we are. Fort first, then hot chocolate. We got a deal?

“I think we do.”

With the scent of cocoa wafting through the house, the two hurried upstairs, Matthew filled with a childish glee. As soon as the building materials were gathered, they got to work rearranging the living room furniture. Matthew had no idea why he was moving what he was moving to where he was moving it, but he trusted Gilbert’s judgement and pushed and pulled and tugged and shoved however Gilbert directed him to.

Soon Matthew found himself standing off to the side with nothing left to do, Gilbert spending a full minute arranging and rearranging pillows and blankets almost obsessively until he was satisfied.

“Oh my God, Mattie,” Gilbert said, staring proudly at their finished work. “This is fucking awesome.”

“More awesome than you?”

“Let's not get ahead of ourselves.” Matthew snickered and Gilbert grinned, taking his hand. “Come on.”

“I don’t wanna knock it over,” he said, steps slow and careful.

“You won’t, come on,” Gilbert said again, guiding him gently to the floor. “We’re gonna crawl in.”

“Oh my God,” Matthew laughed, following after him on all fours, feeling ridiculous and giddy at the same time. He knew this living room like the back of his hand, watched more movies on its TV than he could remember, sat on this very floor to play with Legos and do homework and scrub juice out of the carpet with Alfred before their parents came home. And yet right now, at this very moment, it felt like he was somewhere new, somewhere he’d never been before, and Gilbert was leading the way.

His smile widened as the floor transformed beneath him, his palms and knees sinking into a plush bed of pillows. “Oh my God,” he said again. "I can’t believe we actually did this.”

“I can,” Gilbert said, taking one of Matthew’s hands, pulling him closer. “But this is ten times better then what I had in my head. Your folks have a shit ton of pillows.”

“I know,” Matthew laughed. Gilbert nestled his head against his shoulder. “Al and I used to get in trouble for stealing them while they were away at work. We'd have our fort all cleaned up before they came home, thinking we were so clever. But we could never put them back on the bed as neatly as we'd found them, so they always knew.”

“Think we could fool ‘em this time?”

“Maybe if we're extra, extra careful.”

Gilbert sat up, the smirk on Matthew's lips making his own grow more crooked. “And if we're not?”

“Sounds like you don't really wanna be.”

“I say we leave the fort up all weekend.” Gibert’s voice had become exaggeratedly low, as if letting Matthew in on some kind of conspiracy. “Have it be the first thing they see when the walk in Sunday.”

“Yeah?” Matthew played along. “That's pretty ballsy. I can't exactly promise they won't kick you out on sight.”

“Don't care. I want them to know I've been using *their* pillows to build forts with their son in secret.”

And it was there that they both lost it, Gilbert right after Matthew. And as Matthew tried and failed to catch his breath, and as Gilbert managed to stop only to start cackling again, Matthew couldn't help but wonder what he would be doing right now if Gilbert had listened to him and turned his car back around.

He'd probably be texting Gilbert, bundled in a blanket and laughing to himself at stupid jokes like this one, which he would hear more of once they talked on the phone afterwards. And that was what Matthew had looked forward to when he woke up this morning, smiling to himself as he poured cereal into his bowl. But this, thought Matthew, was so much better.

“God, I love you.”

The words had come from Matthew, left him in a sigh. They sounded effortless, familiar, as if he'd said them a million times before. But he hadn't. He *never* had. As many times as he'd played those words over and over in his mind—when Gilbert “serenaded” him, when Gilbert plopped his head in Matthew's lap to ramble about the day, when Gilbert left him new library books in his locker and slipped sweets into his backpack and snuck out to the parking lot a few minutes early to warm the car for the ride home—he’d never actually said them aloud. Not until that very moment.

Matthew had imagined he'd be more nervous when he finally said them, but instead he felt an overwhelming sense of contentment. Because it wasn't a confession so much as it was a

reaffirmation, and Matthew had not the slightest desire to take it back. Not even as he heard Gilbert's breath hitch mid-exhale.

“I just want you to know that.”

And then Matthew heard Gilbert breathe his name. Felt Gilbert's fingers slip between his. Felt his face heat as Gilbert whispered an even softer *Vögelchen*.

“You know what I want *you* to know?” he said, pressing his forehead to Matthew's. “I can't even remember what my days were like without you in them.” He pulled back slightly, their noses brushing. “And you know what else?”

“What?” Matthew asked softly.

“I don't want to.” Gilbert leaned forward, heart racing, cheeks hot as Matthew met him in the middle. The kisses that followed were gentle, each meeting of their lips longer than the last. It was when they leaned in for a fourth time that Gilbert stopped himself short to whisper, “I love you too.” And only after he kissed Matthew again did he finish with, “So fucking much.”

Matthew huffed out a laugh through his grin, fingers raking up the nape of Gilbert's neck and through his hair, lips pressing to his nose, his cheek, his jaw. And just before Matthew took Gilbert's lips again, the TV, which had been playing quietly in the background, ignored by the two of them, shut off abruptly.

The sudden absence of background noise, of news commentary, of humming kitchen appliances, of the whirring space heater, was what reminded them of the world outside each other's arms.

“Was that…” Matthew began to ask, not finishing because, really, what else could it have been?

“Yeah,” said Gilbert, seeing nothing but black. “Power's out.” He squinted as he looked around, realizing quickly that there was no point. It was pitch black. “Can't see shit.”

“Really? Me neither.”

Gilbert shoved at Matthew in the darkness, Matthew's following laughter contagious. “Little shit.”

“Come on,” Matthew laughed again, getting to his palms and knees and headed for the entrance of the fort. “There're some candles we can light in the closet upstairs.”

Gilbert broke into a cheeky grin as he followed. “Should I start up the bubble bath too?”

Matthew rolled his eyes, his smile just as playful. “Only if you leave me a trail of rose petals.”

Bare

Chapter Summary

> How something so frightening could be so freeing at the same time, Gilbert couldn't comprehend. And yet, by the end of it all, he didn't need to understand the why's or the how's. Matthew made him feel safe. And he was more than satisfied with that simple truth.

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

.⁝ .⁝˙·

Gilbert could feel it happening, and the worst part was, he knew he couldn’t do anything to stop it. And so, with his arms wrapped around a box that had no business weighing as much as it did, he braced for impact. He grimaced as he landed straight on his ass, things raining down on him from above. What exactly these things were, he couldn’t really say, because after all, he still couldn’t see shit.

“Gil!” Matthew gasped out from the hallway, hurrying into the closet. It was a small closet though, certainly not meant to fit two people, so Matthew was only halfway through asking Gilbert if he was okay when he tripped over Gilbert’s leg, and fell face-first into the cardboard box in Gilbert’s lap. A few more things fell from the shelves overhead, and the two groaned.

“Sorry,” Matthew said sheepishly, hands braced against the floor as he propped himself up. ”Are you ok?” Matthew asked again, more successful the second time.

“I’m fine,” Gilbert grunted, shifting his legs under the weight of Matthew and the box he held. Then he laughed. “Klutz.”

“Who are you calling a klutz?” Matthew scoffed. “You literally just trashed this whole closet.”

“Hey, you gotta cut me some slack,” he said, feeling around on the floor for the flashlight that had made him lose his footing in the first place. It had fallen from the shelf just as he was getting the box down. He quickly found it, hiding away in one of the corners as if it knew it was the cause of his sore backside. Damn thing. “I’m kinda new to this whole walking around in total darkness thing.” He promptly clicked on the flashlight, Matthew’s smirking face appearing in front of him.

“Rookie.” They laughed as Gilbert shifted the box again, off his lap and against the wall. Gilbert could now see that little matchboxes were littering the floor; that must have been

what was falling on them earlier.

“Think we got enough freakin’ candles?” Gilbert asked, shining his light on the plain colored box. “This thing has to be at least twenty pounds.” Matthew laughed again.

“Dad is always saying you can never be too prepared for natural disasters.”

“Yeah,” Gilbert chuckled, gathering the stray matchboxes and tossing them in with the candles, “that sounds like him.”

“Let’s just leave it on the floor for now. That way we won’t need to keep getting it off the shelf if we need more.”

“Yeah, sounds good.”

“You sure you’re ok?” Matthew asked again. “You hit the floor really hard.”

“Yeah, I’m fine,” he said, sitting himself up and off the wall at his back. “My mouth kinda hurts though. Think I hit it against something on the way down.”

“What?” Gilbert flushed as Matthew lunged forward suddenly, his hands coming to grasp either side of Gilbert’s face. “Crap, do you taste blood?”

“No, it's just a little tender,” he said, his words a bit distorted by the slight pressure of Matthew’s hands against his cheeks. He smirked and placed his hands over Matthew’s, gently removing them from his cheeks. “Calm down there, Mr. Kirkland.”

“Oh,” Matthew laughed and pulled away. “My bad.”

“Think you can help me out with something, though?” Gilbert took Matthew’s hand as he stood, bringing Matthew to his feet as well. “For the pain?”

“Yeah, of course,” Matthew said, taking a few candles from the box before stepping back out into the hallway. Gilbert grabbed some too, along with a box of matches, shining his flashlight down the hall as Matthew led the way. “We have some aspirin in the bathroom downstairs.”

Gilbert couldn’t help but smile at Matthew’s back. God, he was so fucking cute. All snug in his pullover and slouchy flannels, with house slippers to boot. They weren’t anything special, no frills or fluff or silly animal ears attached, just plain colored slip-ons. Still, unremarkable as they were, they were also somehow endearing. Gilbert remembered teasing Matthew about them the first time he saw him slip them on at the front door, remembered the way Matthew had slapped his shoulder and told him not to be jealous, said they were really comfy and he was missing out.

Jokes aside, he’d said he really only wore them out of habit, the aftermath of constant nagging for forgetting to wear them as a kid. According to his folks, it was to keep them from getting the sniffles, as young children tended to do. But really, Matthew told Gilbert, looking back on it now, he was sure it was just a way to keep their socks on their feet. Apparently, Mr. Bonnefoy and Mr. Kirkland would find he and Alfred’s little socks in the strangest of

places, and the both of them were scolded for it endlessly. It was a cute story, and now whenever Gilbert saw them, he found himself imagining a tiny, tottering Matthew, pouting as he put on his slippers.

“Aspirin?” Gilbert repeated. “Well, actually, I was hoping you might have something else.”

“Oh, um, how about Ibuprofen?”

“Not quite.”

Matthew frowned; he was running out of solutions. He stopped just as they reached the stairs, turning around. Gilbert instinctively moved his flashlight so it wasn’t directly in Matthew’s face, although Matthew unsurprisingly had no reaction to its freakishly bright beam. “Ice?”

“Got any kisses you could spare?”

Matthew’s face bursted with color. “What?” His flush deepened as Gilbert repeated himself.

“I mean, it’s not really a secret that kisses have healing properties,” he said matter-of-factly. “Or are you telling me parents have been lying to their kids since the beginning of time?”

Matthew just stood there for a second or two, dumfounded, feeling the blood rushing through his cheeks. “You’re *actually* the worst,” he said, turning back around and starting down the stairs. Gilbert laughed and quickly followed behind.

“I didn’t actually hear you say no.”

“No.”

“Mattie,” Gilbert whined. “Okay, I’m not dying, sure, but it actually hurts. I mean, not a whole lot, but still…” Gilbert trailed off as Matthew stopped suddenly. “Hey...what’s wrong?”

Matthew turned around and walked up a single step so their faces were level. “The fact that I actually want to do this,” he said, his hand leaving the rail for the back of Gilbert’s neck. Gilbert reddened as Matthew’s fingers curled into the hair at his nape, pulling him in for a kiss. He was smiling, Gilbert could feel it, and it made Gilbert smile too.

“Satisfied?” Matthew asked once he’d pulled away.

“Very.”

“Good. Now c’mon, you big dork,” he said, starting back down the stairs. “Let’s make lunch.”

And Gilbert, dork that he was, practically danced down the stairs, grinning like a madman.

Lunch was PB&J. Simple, satisfying, and most important of all, no appliances required. They’d had their sandwiches with milk, celery sticks, and a few ripe bananas, a “classic kindergarten lunch,” Matthew had joked. There was no telling when the power would come

back on, if it would at all that weekend, so they decided to be strategic about the things they ate. Things like milk and produce had to be first to the first to go, unless they wanted to deal with the stench of rotting food each time they opened the fridge. The freezer would insulate itself as long as they didn't open it, so that's what they settled on.

With their stomachs full for the time being, they retreated back to the warmth of their pillow fort, wrapping themselves in blankets and tangling themselves in each other's limbs. Gilbert had found a shortwave crank radio in the closet upstairs, and after ten or so minutes of fiddling with it he'd found some stations, most of them full of news anchors urging people to stay inside. It got old very quickly. To their credit, the storm was picking up, but still, Gilbert thought, everything they were saying was common sense.

Sure, he hadn't exactly used said common sense when coming here, but that was besides the point.

He'd almost given up when he came across a music station playing "serenades for sweethearts." Matthew had called him a "cornball" as Gilbert placed it proudly on living room floor and joined Matthew inside their fort. And yet, Matthew had to admit….lying there all snuggled and warm, listening to the staticky sounds of old pop love hits over howling wind was really nice.

Gilbert sighed into Matthew's shoulder for the umpteenth time, and Matthew smiled, resting his chin on Gilbert's head. They'd been lying together in silence for nearly an hour now, trapped in a heavy haze of their own contentment, falling in and out of sleep. Matthew could tell that Gilbert was about to nod off again, and hell, Matthew was too, but he fought it this time. There was a nagging at the back of his mind, a question he'd held in for much too long, and he wanted to ask it before he lost Gilbert to sleep again.

"Hey, Gil," he said softly.

"Mm?"

"You awake?"

Gilbert nodded against him. "Mmhm. What's up?" he asked, voice a bit hoarse from lack of use.

"You would tell me if you're bored, right?"

Gilbert slowly opened his eyes. "What?"

"When we still had power, I was gonna suggest we pop some popcorn and have a movie night, but now, well…you know." He laughed sheepishly. "I just don't want you to feel restless."

Gilbert sat up slightly, propped on an elbow. "Are you serious? Matt, we don't *need* to be doing anything. When have we ever had time to be alone, just us, and do absolutely jack shit? This is fucking awesome." Matthew chuckled. "Seriously," Gilbert said, "we could stay just

like this the whole weekend and I wouldn't complain. I feel like I'm...high on something right now."

"So...the complete opposite of bored?" Matthew laughed again. "Thank God."

Gilbert laid back down, snuggled back into his previous position, and dove face first into Matthew's armpit. He breathed in the spiced scent of Matthew's deodorant, and Matthew laughed when he exhaled much louder than was necessary. "Stop, that tickles!"

Gilbert flashed a lazy grin as he pulled away. "Does it really?"

"Yes!"

"How about here?"

Matthew gasped when fingers danced across his stomach. "No! Please don't start!" he giggled, clasping Gilbert's hand before it could do any more damage.

"Alright, fine," Gilbert relented, Matthew's laughter reward enough. He heard Matthew sigh with relief as his hand was freed. He linked their fingers together soon after. Another silence passed as they simply enjoyed one another's touch and warmth, and the soothing static of the radio.

Gilbert listened to Matthew's soft breaths, head lulling to the rise and fall of Matthew's chest. Bored? How could he be? This was...this was everything. Matthew didn't even know how heavy his heart had been pulling out of his driveway this morning, how *he'd* been the one to change that.

And the sole reason Matthew didn't know, was because Gilbert was a coward, too used shoving all the those unwanted feelings to the back of his mind, not wanting Matthew to realize that they were even there to begin with.

Sometimes, Gilbert felt like he was living in a house that was never quite clean. His doubts were a thick layer of dust on curtains and bookshelves. His insecurities were grimey dishes, forgotten in the stale kitchen sink. His fear and anxiety, old jeans and T-shirts strewn across the floor. And his apathy, the scent of the cheap air freshener he used to cover it all up.

But then, Matthew would knock on his front door and it was a frantic rush to hide all the filth Gilbert couldn't bear to let him see, hastily wiping down surfaces, tossing plates into the dishwasher, shoving clothes into drawers and lighting the fancy Yankee candles he'd found on sale at the depot down the street.

That's what it felt like, when he forced all those thoughts to the back of his mind. And he was okay with it. At least, he was until he thought about the fact that he couldn't stay in Matthew's arms forever. No, eventually he'd be kissing Matthew on his doorstep, waving goodbye before he trudged back into his sham of a house, retreated back into his mess of a mind, alone with his pitiful thoughts.

No, Gilbert thought, melting into the warmth of Matthew's body, he didn't want that. He didn't want to be alone anymore. To let Matthew see how he really lived terrified him. But the prospect of loneliness terrified him even more so. Because, truly, what sense was there in feeling alone when someone so precious had come into his life?

Gilbert had never felt this way before. So completely and utterly a part of someone. Like if he were to let go, he'd very well lose a part of himself. He felt vulnerable, but blissfully so. As if Matthew held a part of him that Gilbert knew could be crushed instantly, and yet that he trusted to be handled with caution and care.

The feeling overwhelmed him, and the longer he lie there the faster his heart began to beat. Trust. He *trusted* Matthew. Why had it taken him this long to realize that? It was what he felt when he read Matthew his horrible test scores in Classic Lit. Or when he admitted that sometimes it was he who felt like the younger brother. Or when he wasn't afraid to say that he had no idea where he wanted to go to college...or if he even wanted to at all.

That was when Gilbert asked himself: How could sharing all the other things he held inside be any different?

Matthew didn't know just how much Gilbert had needed him today, to see him and be seen, to hold him and be held, and reminded that he too was deserving of happiness, even when Gilbert felt like he wasn't.

His heart was racing as his lips parted, his voice leaving him to say things he hadn't had the courage to say until today. He laughed suddenly, softly, maybe in hopes that it might offset the churning in his stomach.

"What are you laughing at?" Matthew asked, smile coming to his lips.

"Nothing," replied Gilbert. "It's just…"

"Just?"

"I just...can't believe I could have such a shitty morning turn into…*this*," he said. The last word left his lips tenderly, carefully, as if everything he felt for Matthew was carried in that single syllable.

Matthew frowned as he felt Gilbert shift against him. "What happened this morning?" he asked. "Is everything okay?"

It wasn't Matthew's fault for not realizing how loaded both of those questions were, but even so, Gilbert found himself struggling for his next words. His silence worried Matthew enough that he untangled their legs, repositioned himself so that he and Gilbert lie face to face.

"No," Gilbert finally said, opting to tackle the second question first.

Matthew's frown deepened and he moved closer, their noses brushing as he strained to hear Gilbert's voice, which had become startlingly quiet. "What's wrong?" he asked.

Matthew's hand was warm against his cheek, coaxing out the words that seemed to stick to the inside of his throat. "I'm..." he said, "I'm a fucking liar."

"What? I...don't understand," said Matthew, shaking his head. He could hear Gilbert's breathing, a deep inhale and then a soft, shaky exhale.

"I'm sorry."

"Sorry for what? Help me understand, Gil," he pleaded. Gilbert sighed, another soft huff of air against Matthew's lips.

"My dad called today."

"Is he alright?"

"He's…" Gilbert was so used to giving his usual answer, so used to lying on reflex, that he had to catch himself before he did it again. So, instead of answering that his father was fine, as if he hadn't been stonewalling him for the past six months, he gave the truthful answer.

"I haven't actually spoken to him since summer break."

There was a short pause before Matthew responded with, "What?"

"We got into a fight and...I stopped talking to him."

"I...I'm sorry, Gil." In his state of shock it was all he could answer with, and he felt useless because of it.

From the very beginning of their friendship, Matthew had known that Gilbert's father was constantly out of the country, working in some capacity for the German government. Gilbert had once joked that halfway through middle school, he'd written his father's signature so many times that his own had started to "look like shit" in comparison.

Matthew knew that Gilbert's father was often away, but Gilbert had told him all those months ago exactly what he'd told his parents at dinner last month: they talked a lot, through mail and phone calls and even Skype at times (when his father could remember how to log in, he remembered Gilbert saying).

Knowing this, Matthew would ask how his father was every now and again, always happy to hear that he was in good health. So now, to hear that Gilbert hadn't spoken to his father since before they'd ever met, was jarring.

"No, *I'm* sorry." Gilbert pulled away from Matthew and slowly sat up, looking away as Matthew sat up too. "I'm sorry I waited so long to tell you. It's just...it's a lot, and I didn't wanna just throw all my family's drama on you."

"Gilbert…"

"'Cause hell, who wants to hear about other people's problems when they've got problems of their own, you know? And it's like...like the longer I went without saying anything, the

shittier I felt, because I should be able to tell the person I care for about shit like this instead of lying straight to his face."

"Gil—"

"Fuck, I'm sorry. There are so many things that I should've told you, that I need to tell you, but—but I—" Gilbert stopped speaking as a finger came to his lips.

"Gilbert, stop. Please." Matthew pulled his hand away from Gilbert's mouth and replaced it with his own lips. The kiss was chaste as Matthew wasn't finished speaking. "You don't owe me anything. You didn't and you still don't have to tell me anything you don't want to," he said. "Just because I'm in a relationship with you doesn't mean you have to tell me everything. I'm not entitled to your feelings."

Gilbert swallowed as Matthew took one of his hands, felt his eyes well.

"And on the flip side, that's what I'm here for, to listen. If you wanna talk to me, about anything, I'm here. And I want to listen. So don't you apologize to me, okay?"

Gilbert was shaking, and he knew Matthew could feel it in the hand that he held, but he couldn't stop. Why had he pictured this going so differently? He hadn't expect Matthew to break up with him or anything like that, but Gilbert had been sure Matthew would be hurt. Like he wasn't good enough for Gilbert to confide in. Christ, he'd been lying to Matthew since even before they'd started dating, stewing in his own guilt for just as long, and yet here Matthew was, contradicting everything he'd already made a reality in his mind.

He sunk forward, body limp with relief, and took Matthew into his arms, chin at Matthew's back. He felt Matthew's arms encircle his neck, felt his hand at the back of his head, pressing him closer.

It was a long embrace, and Matthew was content to remain there for however long it took Gilbert to realize that he had nothing to be sorry for.

It was only when Matthew heard a soft sniffle, followed by another exhale, did he realize...Gilbert was crying. Matthew tensed at the realization. He'd never heard Gilbert cry before, and for a moment, he couldn't help feeling responsible for his tears. Maybe, he thought, if he had said this sooner, if he had let Gilbert know that he was more than ready to share the weight of whatever it was he might be going through, Gilbert wouldn't be wracked with so much guilt.

But then another thought crossed Matthew's mind. This was the first time he'd ever seen Gilbert like this, and the reason why he was seeing this part of Gilbert, one he'd never seen before today, was because Gilbert felt comfortable enough to show it to him. This was Gilbert, his smug, charming, obnoxious, endearing, annoying, addicting Gilbert, lying himself bare, allowing Matthew to see him in a way that he knew few others got to. And Matthew could feel a knot forming in his throat as Gilbert trembled against him, squeezing him as if he might suddenly vanish.

"*Danke*," he heard Gilbert say. He shook his head, pressing his lips to Gilbert's shoulder.

The two remained there for a while, neither saying a word as they fell back into their own world of nothing but each other. When the silence was finally broken, it was Gilbert who spoke first.

He pulled back slightly, wiping at his eyes. “Damn. Guess now I can add ‘moodkiller’ to my resume, huh?”

Matthew smiled and reached out for Gilbert’s face, thumb swiping at whatever wetness he found. “Pretty hard to kill the mood when you’re in a pillow fort and Queen’s on the radio.”

“Huh.” Gilbert smiled back. “Wonder whose ideas those were.”

“I dunno, but kudos to that guy, whoever he is.”

Matthew laughed as Gilbert’s arms came around him again, pulling him back down to the pillow-cushioned floor. Gilbert sighed into Matthew’s hair, breath tickling the back of his neck. “I should’ve told you sooner.”

“Gil...I told you that you didn’t need to—“

“I know,” he said, closing his eyes as his nose caught the scent of Matthew's shampoo. “But I should've told you sooner, for myself. I've only told you this one thing, but I already feel so much…”

“Better?”

“Lighter.”

Matthew turned to his other side to face Gilbert. “Gilbert,” he said, reaching out to run fingers through his bangs. “That’s all I want for you.”

Gilbert took the hand playing in his hair. "I don't even know where or...how to start."

"That's okay. You don't have to know either of those right now." Matthew took his hand, brought his lips to the back of it, and softly spoke, “Either way, I'm here.”

Gilbert took another deep breath, then slowly exhaled before he spoke. "I know I've never mentioned him to you before, but I have a grandfather who's still living in Germany. He's my dad's dad. My Opa Fritz. And...I guess I never mentioned him because I was afraid that as soon as I did, I might not have one to talk about anymore. Sometimes life just decides to fuck you over like that.”

"Is he...okay?" Matthew asked, hesitating to finish his question because he already had a feeling that the answer wouldn't be a happy one.

“He's got something called COPD, it's a lung disease. He’s actually had it since before we moved here, but I never knew until...last summer. That’s when Dad called me from Opa's hospital room, and told me he was 'sick.’” Gilbert spat the last word out. “When what he really should have said was 'dying.’”

He paused, gulped away the tightness in his throat because, dammit, he needed to get this out. So he focused on the feeling of Matthew's hand in his, and continued.

“But up until then, it was a good summer. A really good summer,” he said, the tightness in his chest slowly dissipating. “The day before dad called, we spent the whole afternoon at the beach. Me, Lud, Toni, Feli and Lovino. We only had two weeks left of summer break, and we weren't gonna be lost little freshmen anymore, so that was our day to celebrate." He smiled through a grimace. "We probably did a little too much celebrating. I was so distracted by all the food and booze and swimming that I didn't put on as much sunscreen as I should've."

"Gilbert!" Matthew chided.

"I know, I know," he said sheepishly. "I might as well have been asking for skin cancer, with how long we were in the sun. It was one of the worst sunburns I've ever had, so believe me, I've learned my lesson."

"Well, good..." Matthew nuzzled into Gilbert's shoulder. "You still enjoyed yourself though?"

"Hell yeah. If you could've seen us...it was like we were on top of the world. Lovino and Feli convinced Old Man Vargas to donate a really fancy bottle of imported wine from his stash, then we headed to Toni's place and picked up the churros his mom made for us before she went to work that morning. I’d finished a really awesome batch of kraut the week before so I brought a jar of it to go with the wurst Lud made. Lovino kept giving me shit for how ‘sour’ the kraut was but he sure as hell finished the last of it."

“Wine, sausage, and churros, huh?”

“Yeah,” he said through a smirk, “a feast for kings. We ate and got buzzed, swam, ate some more. I couldn't even put on a shirt without tearing up the next day, but damn was it worth it. I wouldn't trade that day for anything. The next day was...the complete opposite.”

The small smile on Matthew's face slowly fell, though he said nothing.

“Dad was supposed to come home from one of his business trips that weekend. He would've landed early morning, so Lud and I planned to surprise him at the airport. We hadn't seen him in a whole month, and it was the longest he'd ever been away at that point, so we bought all the things we needed to make a nice dinner. We got this cheesy 'welcome home' banner and Lud kept bugging me about which flavor of cake he should make, and we...we were just...excited.

“So when he called two days before his flight in, and told us he wasn't coming home, we couldn't believe it. And when he said it was because Opa was in the hospital, it felt like some sick joke.”

Gilbert ran a hand through his hair as he recalled the sound of his father's voice through the receiver of his phone, fatigued, somber, apologetic. He'd never forget it, the way his disappointment turned to numbness and his numbness to rage.

Their father told them about his Opa's disease, Gilbert told Matthew as they lie, about how it was progressive but manageable, about how he was scheduled for a surgery that would hopefully improve his symptoms, but Gilbert just couldn't process it. Ludwig was just so calm and controlled and, *God*, Gilbert knew that was just how Ludwig handled things, but back then, he admitted, it just made him so *angry*.

He was angry that Ludwig *wasn't* angry. He was angry that Ludwig was making it so *easy* on their father. He was angry that there would be no surprise at the airport terminal. Angry that Ludwig no longer had a reason to showcase his homemade buttercream frosting. Angry that the chair at the head of the table would remain empty. But most of all, he was angry that all the joy he'd found that summer, had been snatched away in an instant.

“I couldn't even listen to him anymore. I just...blew up at him. I said some really shitty things, and then I went for a walk. That was the last time we spoke. But Opa had a lung reduction surgery a few weeks later. And Dad's been in Berlin ever since, looking after him until he's finished all his follow-up appointments.”

There was a short pause as Matthew waited to see if Gilbert still had more to add, but Gilbert remained silent. Matthew's voice was gentle as he asked, “Did your dad ever tell you why he never told you about your grandfather?”

“He said he never told us because Opa asked him not to, and I can understand keeping it from a seven and a five year old, but, Christ, I'm nearly eighteen. You'd think that's 'mature’ enough to know that my own grandfather is wasting away.”

“I see…”

“Dad was away a lot last year. More than he’d ever been since we moved here. Usually when he left for Berlin, the longest he'd be away was a week, sometimes a week and a half. But last year, it started to be more like two weeks. He said he was working on some on some big project, I can't remember what about, but that's why he said he was going to be away more. We didn't have a reason not to believe him.”

“Then...it wasn't true.”

“Somewhat. He was doing what he said he was, but that wasn't the main thing that kept him there. When he called us that day, he admitted that the real reason he was away so much, was because Opa was getting worse, and he was worried about him living alone. Each time he'd go back, he'd try to convince Opa to come back with him.”

“To come here and live with you?”

Gilbert nodded. “But Opa always refused. Said he didn't want me and Ludwig to see him so sick. But has he ever thought that we'd just rather see him before he goes, than not see him at all? Hell, I was old enough to understand death when I was ten. I could've been told this years ago, and yeah, it would've hit me hard, but...not as hard as finding out that my dad’s been lying to me my whole childhood.”

He bit his lip, his head heavy with the bitter realization of what could have been. He and Ludwig, Dad and Opa, Berlitz, Blackie, and Aster, all together in a house that fit them just right.

Dad and Opa would play chess on Sunday mornings while he and Ludwig went on an early morning run with the dogs. On weeknights, they'd all gather around the TV and watch reruns of whatever cheesy sitcom was in season, the scent of dinner rolls in the oven filling the house. They would surround the dining room table, talk about their days, laugh and tell jokes that the adults were too old and lame to understand, and enjoy the food, and each other's company. A happy family. Was that too much to ask for?

It was actually one of the reasons why he'd been so nervous coming to Matthew's for dinner with his parents. Up until that point, Gilbert hadn't actually sat down to dinner with anyone other than his brother in months. He wasn't sure he remembered what it felt like to have more than one pair of eyes on him while he ate. Thank God he'd managed to appear as though that wasn't the case.

“I mean, all this was going on while me and Ludwig were fucking clueless. Aren't we family? Don't we get to be a part of this discussion? It's...it's bullshit.”

Suddenly, he felt Matthew's thumb running along his knuckles. His body, which he hadn't realized had become so tense, slowly unwound. His shoulders fell and he sunk back into the pillows beneath him.

“I'm so sorry, Gilbert,” whispered Matthew. “That isn't fair to you at all. Neither of you. You have every right to be upset.”

Gilbert swallowed again, eyes welling up with tears so suddenly that he had not even a second to fight them back. They spilled over, and Gilbert didn't even bother to wipe them away. The heat of his tears was bittersweet. Hearing Matthew validate his feelings was more liberating than he could have ever imagined. But Gilbert was not innocent, because as frustrated as he was, he couldn't forget how his stomach dropped when he heard his father's voice this morning, calling his name, pleading to hear his voice.

“I wasn't expecting her to pass him the phone.”

“Her?”

“My little cousin. I was talking to her on the phone this morning. She was staying with Dad for the weekend. Right after we said our goodbyes, she gave him the phone. Lud had been talking with him before that, so I guess she assumed I'd wanna talk to him too.”

“Did you...hang up?”

“Not right away. Dad kept saying my name and I just...froze.”

“Did he sound upset?”

“No, he sounded…” Gilbert paused, searching for the right word. “Relieved. It...it was like I never yelled at him. And it made me feel like shit.” He sighed. “So I hung up and came here to cuddle with my boyfriend and forget about it. But instead I had to be a jerk and fuck up Valentine's Day whining to you about my family.” Gilbert closed his eyes, ran a hand down his face. “Sorry, Matt.”

“Turn your back to me.”

Gilbert frowned, feeling Matthew let go of his hand. “What?”

“Just do it,” Matthew said. “Trust me.”

Though turning away from Matthew was the absolute last thing he wanted to do, he obliged, rolling onto his side. The moment he did, Matthew shifted closer, moving himself so that his chest was pressed to Gilbert's back. Gilbert felt himself flush as Matthew's arm draped over his waist.

“Remember a couple weeks after we met, when you told me to stop apologizing for everything?”

“Yeah,” he answered.

“Well, now it's my turn to tell you. Cut it out. You haven't ruined anything. Okay?”

Gilbert snaked his feet between Matthew's ankles. “Okay.”

“I’m glad you told me.”

“Yeah...me too,” he said, relishing in the warmth of Matthew's body, in the feeling of being held. There was a short silence before he spoke again. “It was easier...when I thought Dad was mad at me. I thought for sure he would be, after what I said to him.”

Gilbert's socks were warm and soft against Mathew's skin. He curled his own feet to meet Gilbert's. Sure, he could ask what exactly it was Gilbert had said, but he wouldn’t. Because maybe it was something Gilbert didn't want to repeat. And more importantly, in this moment, it didn't really matter. So instead, Matthew asked, “If you could take back what you said, would you?”

Gilbert brought a hand to cover his mouth. The mere thought of how hopeful his father had sounded this morning, in spite of the way Gilbert had left things, made him nauseous.

Gilbert felt a lot of things when he thought about his family, about how many threads had been cut, how many holes had yet to be mended. He felt so many things. It was only that anger was easier to acknowledge, easier to act on. The other things he felt—guilt, shame, jealousy, sadness, longing for days passed—weren’t so. They were complicated emotions. Painful to process. They fed off of each other, made Gilbert shrink when he caught his own reflection. It had always made sense for Gilbert to push them aside, keep them hidden.

But now, here they lie in plain sight, between he and Matthew, and suddenly, they didn't seem so frightening.

“Yes,” he said finally, a whisper of regret.

Matthew shifted against him, another silence washing over them. The radio had lost signal, its music now replaced by a low hum of static. The wind continued to wail.

“It's not too late,” Matthew said, “to take them back.” He felt Gilbert sigh, though it was too soft to hear.

“I don't even know if I can, Matt.”

“Do you *want* to?”

“Yes.”

“Then you *can*, Gil. That doesn't mean you have to get on the phone with your dad the moment you're back home. It just means that you're willing to have that conversation. Whenever you feel ready to.”

Gilbert felt the stinging at his eyes yet again and, dammit, there they were, making his lips all salty. But the weightlessness he felt with every following breath, was undeniably sweet. He took a moment to savor in it, the feeling of knowing that even at what he considered his least awesome, the person he cherished, still cherished him just as much. “Mattie?”

“Yes?”

“Thank you.”

Matthew smiled as Gilbert's fingers slipped between his. “Of course,” he said. “I hope you don't mind I stole your job as the big spoon.”

“You kidding? I fucking love being the little spoon. I formally retire from my position as Big Spoon. This is comfy as hell.”

Matthew laughed. “Don’t think I've ever been hired on the spot before.”

“Can’t pass up a guy who knows what he's doing.” Gilbert snickered when Matthew squeezed him from behind, thinking that there was no one else he'd rather be with, and no other place he'd rather be.

Maybe he wasn't quite yet ready, not yet sure of what he would say or how he would say it, of where he would be or what he'd be doing when those words finally came to him. But Matthew was right. He just had to be willing, and there was no doubt in his mind that he was. He was willing to mend the bond he'd broken. Willing to make his family whole again.

Chapter End Notes

It truly warms my heart to see Hetalia still in the hearts and minds of fanfic writers and readers, a full decade from its webcomic debut. I saw that Hetalia is still ranked second on FF for the most number of stories in the Anime/Manga category! Is that not incredible? It really says something about how big of an impact this series has left on its audience. Or maybe I'm just an overdramatic old biddy blinded by nostalgia.

Thanks so much for reading and supporting me through the years. Your comments, kudos, subscriptions, and bookmarks mean the world to me and always keep me going. I hope you've had a great start to the new year :)

Look at Me

Chapter Summary

> So Matthew lifted his head, cheeks burning with shame because it had been a long time since he'd felt so insecure in front of the person who was always reminding him of his worth.

Chapter Notes

> Fair warning, there is smut towards the end of this chapter, with plenty of fluffy pillow talk to wrap it all up if you'd rather skip straight to that :)
>
> (I initially posted the less explicit, FF.net version here, but it is now updated with the extra smutty, AO3 appropriate version because I'm shameless when it comes to these two. Enjoy.)

⠠⠄⠇⠒⠒⠇ ⠠⠄⠄⠇ ⠠⠄⠶⠄

“Did you grab forks already?” Matthew asked as he crossed into the dining room from the kitchen. In his hands was a glass dish, cold to the touch. Dinner for two.

“Yep, now all we need is a little mood lighting.” Matthew laughed as he heard Gilbert strike a match.

“Blizzards,” Matthew said behind a dreamy sigh, “so romantic.”

Gilbert snickered and looked up at Matthew from his newly-lit candle, the last in a neat row of five he’d centered on the table. As many candles as there were in that damned box, Gilbert figured he might as well put them to good use; one could never create *too* much ambiance. “Here, I’ll take that,” he said, meeting Matthew to take the dish from his hands. Matthew thanked him as he set it down on the table.

“You sure you’re okay with eating it straight from the fridge?” asked Matthew. “If we let it sit out for a bit it won’t be as cold.”

Cold though it was, it was lucky that they’d had a pre-made meal in the fridge at all, what with the oven currently out of commission. After this was gone though, they’d have to make do with more sandwiches until the power returned. If it ever did, that is.

Gilbert was vigilant about lighting new candles when the old ones burned out, and although he tried for several minutes to revive the signal they'd lost on the crank radio, he eventually admitted defeat, saluting it as he gave it their thanks for its service. It sat abandoned in front of the TV now.

The Bonnefoy home was well insulated, but with temperatures as low as they were and the lack of a heat source, the rooms had become colder than they once were. It was no surprise then, that Gilbert and Matthew used each other to keep warm. Each time the wind howled and the windows creaked under pressure, it sent shivers down their spines, the kind that felt good because you knew someone else was there to take the chill away. They'd listened to the chaos outside, to the sound of garbage bins tipping over and the clang of mailboxes leaving their posts, laughing and holding onto each other as if the house might be carried away next.

It was a miracle that the two had even managed to leave their fort, neither all that eager to abandon the warm, fluffy new home they'd made for themselves.

“Nooo,” Gilbert had whined as Matthew sat up. “My birdie isn't ready to leave the nest yet.”

“Gilbert,” he'd laughed as Gilbert pulled him back down. “Your stomach just made the longest growl I think I've ever heard in my life, so I think it's time to look for what we can eat for dinner.”

“Okay, yeah, but...five more minutes? Please?”

Matthew wasn't the least bit proud to admit how quickly he'd caved at the cute, needy sound of Gilbert's voice, at the way he'd nuzzled his nose against the junction of Matthew's neck and shoulder. But he had, and when it came time to make the trek to the kitchen (really just the next room over, but hell, everything felt far when you didn't want to move), he'd gotten up a lot more quickly than was necessary, shooing Gilbert away as he began to place kisses along his neck. It was either that, or find himself snorting yet another line of Gilbert Beilschmidt, spiraling into a world where he could think of nothing but how good this made him feel, and how he never wanted it to end.

It was quite the feat, but eventually, they managed to escape themselves. And now in the dining room they settled, wrapped in the Bonnefoy’s warmest robes, making the most of this unconventional dinner date.

“I’d eat your dad’s cooking straight off the floor, Matt. You bet your ass I’m gonna eat it straight out of the fridge.” Gilbert brought a guiding hand to the small of Matthew’s back, feeling him shake with soft laughter. “Shall we?”

Matthew’s face heated as Gilbert pulled out a chair, and he sat down. Gilbert sat down across from him at the opposite side of the table. “You’re really bringing out all the stops for a bit of cold leftovers.”

“What, you don’t remember?”

“Remember what?” asked Matthew, picking up his fork.

“We’ve been trying to get reservations here for months now. We’re lucky your brother managed to pull some strings for us.”

Matthew slowly broke into a grin. “Oh, right. We did get lucky, huh?”

Gilbert nodded, his smirk growing. “It’s a good thing that Alfred had such great connections to the chef.”

Matthew laughed aloud. “Well, since you got us such nice reservations, let *me* take care of the bill tonight.”

“Only if you let me get the next.”

“Deal.” Matthew’s smile grew wider as he added, “Now, let’s eat before the food gets cold.”

The two broke into more laughter, and then, finally, put their forks to good use.

It was Francis’ deep dish quiche, made for dinner two nights ago. He made a different variety each time; this last time it had a fluffy, eggy filling of spinach, mushrooms, cheese, and bacon, with crust made from scratch, of course. Francis usually made a large portion because it was always served hot the day it was made, and then everyone would help themselves to the chilled leftovers in the following days, packing it for lunches or reheating it for breakfast in the morning.

So of all the things that they could’ve been eating during a power outage, this was a godsend. And Gilbert wasted no opportunity to say so, much to Matthew’s amusement.

Gilbert hummed around the fork in his mouth for what was probably the third time, chewing and swallowing before he said, “This is fucking incredible.”

Matthew grinned and took another forkful himself. “I think the crust is the best part.”

“I think the whole damn thing is the best part.” He paused in taking another bite to add, “God bless the French.” Matthew laughed.

After they finished eating, they sat there for a moment, licking their lips and wiping their mouths, moaning at the fullness of their stomachs.

“I could fall asleep right here,” said Gilbert.

Matthew smiled. “I bet this cold shower’ll wake you right back up.”

“Ah, fuck,” he said, cringing a little. He’d forgotten about the no hot water during a power outage thing. “Yeah, that’ll do it.”

“I can go first. You can wait in my room if you want.”

“Nah, I’ll hop in first, just to get it over with. But before that...” he said, smiling at the way Matthew had hunched himself over the table, as if doing so would somehow make him less full. “I hope you can make some room for dessert.”

“What?” Matthew laughed.

“Be right back,” said Gilbert as he got to his feet. “And don't worry, if you can't finish it, we'll get the rest to-go.”

Matthew laughed softly as he followed the sound of Gilbert's footsteps into the kitchen, feeling downright silly for how much he was enjoying this impromptu role play, and for how eager he was to find out what exactly their surprise last course entailed.

Unbeknownst to Matthew, Gilbert had come with said surprise in his overnight bag, and he’d managed to sneak it into one of the kitchen cabinets while Matthew was on the phone with his father. Gilbert was pleased to find the box sitting just as neatly as he'd left it, though he still couldn't get over how obnoxiously red it was, like if it were just a shade lighter, it wouldn't have been fit to sell. He blushed as he took it into his hands.

“Now, don't laugh at me too hard,” Gilbert said as he crossed back into the room.

“Huh?” Matthew raised a brow as Gilbert took his seat. “Why would I laugh?”

Gilbert placed the box between them, gently guiding Matthew's hand to it. “See for yourself.”

Matthew ran his hand timidly along its surface. It was smooth and yet stiff, some kind of boxed packaging from what Matthew could tell. He brought both hands to feel around its perimeter, expecting to find it was a rectangular shape. But it was strangely curved. He dragged his hands along the edges of the box a few times before he realized:

It was heart-shaped. And oh *God*, it couldn't be.

“Gil, wha—” He began, unable to contain his own laughter as he heard an airy chuckle leave Gilbert too. “What is this?” he asked, although he had a pretty good idea of what he was holding.

“Assorted chocolates.”

And Matthew did indeed laugh as Gilbert had predicted, just because it was so ironic. They’d been teasing each other since the beginning of February about all the flowers and chocolates and teddy bears they'd exchange. Gilbert vowed to throw a pebble at his window once his parents fell asleep, sneak Matthew onto the roof and serenade him by the moonlight.

Matthew promised to bring him freshly baked cookies in a prettily ribboned box and read him lovesick poetry. It was their own little inside joke, cheeky declarations that made the both of them giggle and snort at the ridiculousness of it all. But as it turned out, neither of them were as above it as they claimed to be, because here Gilbert was placing a box of chocolates between them, and here Matthew was smiling wider than he knew was possible.

“You really did it.”

“I did,” Gilbert said. “Figured I could start with these while I work on my serenade.”

Matthew laughed again, and Gilbert could feel his face grow warmer as he watched Matthew go pink. “This is...really freaking sweet, Gil. Thank you.”

Gilbert popped off the top. “Share some with me?”

Matthew nodded eagerly, and Gilbert couldn't help but smile at Matthew's reactions to each different filling he tasted, each one a little surprise. He’d laughed as a string of caramel dribbled down Matthew's chin, reached across the table to wipe it away despite Matthew's insistence that he'd “meant to do that.” Matthew's slippers had inched their way to his side of the table, and Gilbert took the opportunity to trap them between his own feet, not knowing why he found it so satisfying.

“Okay,” Matthew said, licking chocolate from his lips. “We should close this now before we finish it all.”

“We?” Gilbert said with smirk. “Or you?”

“Hey,” he pouted, “I only had one more piece than you.”

Gilbert laughed, popping the top back onto the box. “I'm just glad you liked them.”

“Yeah...I really did.”

“Good. Cause we've got the whole rest of the weekend to finish them.”

Matthew nodded and smiled, licked at his lips again. One of Gilbert's legs had snaked around his, and it made his heart speed up. “Did you, um, still want to shower first?”

“Yeah, unless you really wanted to.”

“I really don't,” he chuckled. “It's all you.”

“Awesome,” said Gilbert, beginning to clear the table. “I’ll wash these real quick first.”

“No, I’ll do it.” He held out his hands, motioning for Gilbert to hand the dishes over. “Go shower.”

Gilbert shrugged and obliged. “Yes, sir,” he said, passing them on. He got to his feet. “Keep the bed warm for me?”

Matthew flushed, and the small smile that came to his lips, followed by a hum of assurance, made Gilbert change color too. And suddenly, a cold shower didn’t sound all that bad.

Matthew was curled up in his bed, readjusting the earbuds in his ears, when Gilbert walked in fresh from the shower. He cursed when he bumped into Matthew’s computer chair.

“You okay?” Matthew asked as he sat up, laughter muffled behind a hand.

“Yeah,” he laughed sheepishly, “just need to get some light before I break something.”

“Didn’t you have a candle in the bathroom with you?”

“I have it,” he said, placing it carefully on Matthew’s computer desk. “Just gotta relight it. Blew out on the way here.” Gilbert threw his towel over his shoulder and took out a match from the little matchbox he’d snagged from the closet. Three strikes, and the room was bathed in a soft, warm light, the boys’ shadows flickering to life on the back wall.

Gilbert smiled as his eyes settled on Matthew’s curled figure. He snagged his towel from over his shoulder and started rubbing it vigorously against his damp hair. “You were right about that shower. I’m wide awake now.”

Matthew hummed and snuggled further into his blankets. “I don’t think I’m ready to be wide awake yet.”

Matthew gasped as Gilbert’s damp towel landed on his head.

“Gilbert!”

“You ready now?” he said, arms crossed at his chest as he approached the foot of the bed. He dodged as the towel came flying back in his direction, laughing as it missed him and fell to the floor. Without missing a beat, he picked it back up and resumed drying his hair.

“You’re so annoying,” Matthew pouted.

“It’s pronounced ‘awesome.’ How many times have we been over this?” He sat himself down on the edge of the bed, his back to Matthew.

“Oh, my bad. What I really meant to say was ‘awful.’”

“What was that? Amazing?”

Matthew leaned forward and shoved at Gilbert’s back in an attempt to push him off the bed, but all the strength he’d mustered waned when his hand pressed against bare skin. What should’ve been a rough shove ended up as a halfhearted nudge and Matthew felt hot as he pulled away, Gilbert snickering.

He hadn’t even considered that Gilbert wasn’t fully clothed right now. And suddenly, his heart sped up. He leaned back against the headboard, sunk back into his pillow, and pretended he and Gilbert were at the beach instead of in his bedroom.

“What are you listening to?” Gilbert asked, noticing the one earbud still in Matthew’s ear, connected to the phone sitting next to him.

“Hm?” Matthew had forgotten he was even listening to anything; he’d paused it when Gilbert came in bumping into things. “Oh, it’s actually a book.”

Gilbert grinned. “Of course it is.”

And Matthew flushed. “Shut up.”

A silence settled over the room as Gilbert got himself situated, and as Matthew listened to him do so. The sound of terry cloth rubbing against his hair, of deodorant being uncapped and glided across his skin. And that smell, the smell of soap and freshly cleaned skin...Matthew's fingers fiddled with the earbud he'd pulled out.

"Hey, Mattie…"

"Y-Yeah?"

"When I was in the shower," he said, throwing his towel around his neck, "I realized that I never actually asked you if you were okay with me sleeping in your bed." He turned around to look at Matthew. "I just assumed you were, and that was really shitty of me, and I'm sorry."

Matthew frowned. "What? Gil—"

"You know I'm more than okay with sleeping on the floor, right?"

"You're *not* sleeping on the floor."

"I'll just bring some pillows and blankets from our fort downstairs and—"

"No!" Matthew cried. "I *want* you to sleep with me." There was a short pause as they both flushed a deep red. "I-In my bed, I meant. I want you to."

"Yeah?"

"Yes. I really do. Gil…" Matthew moved himself to join Gilbert at the foot of the bed. "If I didn't want you here, I would've said so when you mentioned it earlier. You don't have anything to be sorry about. Okay?"

Gilbert felt himself relax as Matthew's fingers slipped between his, having not even realized he was a bit tense. "Okay," he laughed softly, awkwardly, in that way that Matthew absolutely adored. "I just...wanted to make sure."

Matthew brought a hand to his cheek, and placed a soft, sweet kiss against his lips. "Thank you," he said, placing another on Gilbert's cheek. "You're on bed warming duty. I'm gonna go take a shower."

"Godspeed," Gilbert said, putting his head to pillow and wrapping himself in covers. He gave a groan of satisfaction.

"Thanks," Matthew laughed, "I'll be quick."

Gilbert's eyes followed Matthew as he left the room, lips still curled into a soft smile even after he'd closed the door behind him. He sighed, eyes leaving the door to wander around Matthew's room. There wasn't anything particularly remarkable about it, it was a bedroom—cream colored walls and carpet in a shade to match, a window looking out onto the backyard, a little desk and wardrobe, a closet, a nightstand—it had all the basics. And yet there were

little things that reminded Gilbert that this was *Matthew's* bedroom. Everywhere Gilbert looked sparked a memory.

Like the little trash can behind the door. Each time Gilbert came over, he'd waste no opportunity to practice his free throws from across the room, tossing balls of crumpled paper or apple cores or candy wrappers into the bin, never without his own homemade sound effects of roaring crowds or airhorns. Matthew would enjoy himself a little too much when he'd miss the mark and have to make his walk of shame across the room. And for that reason, sometimes Gilbert missed on purpose.

"You know, this would work a lot better if I had some support from the sidelines."

"Sorry, my bets are on the other team."

"And what team is that?"

"The one not playing with my trash can."

And the little potted plants on Matthew's windowsill, different varieties of succulents, always brought a little smirk to his lips. They reminded him of the first time he'd visited Matthew's, just a few weeks after Matthew had first come to his.

"Are these your favorite kind of plants?" Gilbert had asked, roaming all around his room like the nosy friend he was. Matthew had said to make himself comfortable, after all.

"Not my favorite," Matthew had said, looking sheepish. "They're just hard to kill."

"Weren't blessed with a green thumb?"

"Eh, it's mostly just me forgetting to water them," he'd laughed. "But Dad never misses a day."

"Oh, is he big on plants?"

Matthew had broken into a huge grin, and took his hand. And just like that, Gilbert was taken on an surprise tour of the Bonnefoy's backyard garden.

It had looked like something straight out of magazine spread, vegetables on one end and different varieties of flowers at the other. Gilbert had been surprised to see flowers in bloom because, at that time, winter had been just around the corner. But apparently, Mr. Kirkland was just that good. What he lacked in cooking skills, Matthew had joked, he more than made up for with his talents in the garden.

Gilbert had enjoyed listening to him reminisce about all the memories he had in that garden, like the first time he and Alfred had heard Mr. Kirkland talking to his plants, and they'd thought it was the funniest thing.

"Flowers like to be talked to," Mr. Kirkland had said to them. "Otherwise they'd get very lonely. Wouldn't you be lonely if no one talked to you?"

When said that way, it had made a lot of sense to he and Alfred, Matthew told him, so they started talking to the flowers in the garden too. It was apparently something that Matthew did even today, greeting his succulents each morning because, Gilbert remembered him saying, he liked to think it made them a little less lonely.

Gilbert had sworn his heart was close to bursting when he watched Matthew smile into a backyard daisy and ask it how it was doing. And he remembered the way he'd blushed as Matthew asked him if he wanted to give it a try.

“So, I just...say 'hi?’” Gilbert had asked him, feeling silly and and yet warm with Matthew smiling at him the way that he was.

“Mmhm, you can ask if they're enjoying the weather, or how many bees came to visit them today, or just tell them they look nice. You can talk to them about anything.”

“Okay…” Gilbert had lowered himself to the ground, making eye contact with a cluster of tulips. “Hey, uh, you guys look awesome.”

That was when Matthew had laughed, and Gilbert was convinced that his heart had indeed done something it wasn't made to do. “Perfect.”

Gilbert rolled to his side and looked over at the nightstand, eyes landing on a dingy white teddy bear with buttons for eyes. This little guy was always in the same spot, perched up against Matthew’s alarm clock. Gilbert had noticed it on that very first visit, but he'd forgotten to ask about it. So, on his second visit determined not to miss his chance this time, he'd interrupted their homework session to ask Matthew who his little friend was, if it had had a name.

“Oh,” Matthew had laughed a bit. “Yeah.”

“So you gonna introduce us or what?”

“What happened to staying focused?” Matthew asked wryly. They’d been studying for a civics test at the time. Or at least attempting to.

“Come on, how can I stay focused when you’ve got a friend over there just dying to meet me?”

“Oh my God.”

“I can hear him complaining from all the way over here. Wait, what’s that?” Gilbert brought a hand to his ear as if straining to hear. “Man, I don’t know what to tell you, little buddy, Mattie says we have to keep reading this super exciting book.”

“You’re really doing this right now.” Matthew snorted, shook his head.

Gilbert promptly closed Matthew’s textbook. “Let’s take a ten minute break. Just ten minutes, okay?”

“Fine,” Matthew relented, unable to hold back a smile. Gilbert had been able to tell that this upcoming test was stressing Matthew out, and if he had to talk to inanimate objects to see those anxious wrinkles in his forehead disappear, then so be it.

“So, your friend?”

Matthew laughed. “His name is Kuma...um, Kuma…”

“You don’t remember his name?” Gilbert snickered. “Some friend you are.”

“Shut up!” Matthew laughed again. “I used to know his whole name, but I forgot it. Papa got it as a gift from some Japanese company, so it’s a Japanese name. Kumaji...something. Anyway, I just call him Kuma. I’ve had him since I was a really young and I...just have good memories with him.”

“That’s pretty damn cute and all, but I hope he knows he’s got some competition. There can only be one best friend.”

“Says who?”

“Says Gilbert Beilschmidt.”

“Really.”

“*Wirklich.*”

Matthew gasped suddenly, and Gilbert frowned.

“What?”

“You didn’t hear that?” he asked, looking quite taken aback.

“Hear what?” Gilbert’s brows scrunched closer together as Matthew motioned for him to come closer, and he leaned in only for Matthew to whisper into his ear:

“Kuma says you’re full of shit.” Matthew couldn’t even fully pull himself back before he started laughing. “His words, not mine.”

“Alright, you little asshole,” Gilbert said, grin widening as he got another snort out of Matthew. “It’s on.”

Gilbert laughed to himself as he stared into the stuffed bear’s black eyes, their bitter rivalry now simmered down to what Gilbert felt was a stalemate. And as such, now Gilbert could admit...the little guy *was* pretty cute.

He shifted onto his back and sighed again. The sheets, the blankets, the pillow at his head, they all smelled strongly of Matthew, and it was comforting and frustrating at the same time, because it was as if Matthew was right next to him and yet...he wasn’t.

He looked at the digital clock on Matthew's nightstand. It was half past eight. Matthew had been gone for, what? Just shy of ten minutes? He flushed and looked up at the ceiling. Why the hell did it feel like so much longer? He would do this twice more, ceiling, clock, ceiling, clock, and just as he began to seriously consider checking up on Matthew, the door opened.

Matthew walked in in his flannel bottoms, blue this time instead of red, and a T-shirt, and if that wasn't enough to make Gilbert's heart pang, Matthew had gathered his hair into a messy little topknot.

"Miss me?" he asked, closing the door behind him.

"I was about to come and check if you were still alive. Guess you enjoyed the cold shower a lot more than I did," he teased.

Matthew blushed deeply as he crossed the room to rummage through his nightstand drawer. "I didn't actually spend all that time in the shower," he said, fishing out a hair brush. He sat himself down on his side of the bed, let his hair loose from its tie, and began brushing through potential knots and tangles. "I lost something in the bathroom and was looking for it."

Gilbert stretched himself out alongside Matthew and brought his arms around his waist, enjoying the sweet, tropical scent of Matthew's shampoo. "You find it?"

"Yes," Matthew laughed softly. And just as Gilbert went to ask what joke he'd been left out of, Matthew finished with, "It was my right prosthetic."

Gilbert was so focused on the sounds of the brush gliding through Matthew's hair, each stroke slow and deliberate, that it took him a beat or two to realize what Matthew had just said.

"Wait," he said, his next words caught in his own laughter, "you lost an eye? How did that happen?"

"Well, first, I got cancer." Matthew giggled as Gilbert squeezed him tightly and suddenly from behind.

"You know what I meant, smartass."

He laughed again as Gilbert let up. "I was cleaning them and accidentally dropped one on the floor. But eventually I found it under the sink cabinet."

"Why didn't you come call me to help?"

Matthew scoffed. "What, first scare the crap out of you by showing up with one of my eyes missing, and then traumatize you even more by having you look for it?" He shook his head, focusing his brush on the ends of his hair. "Trust me, you didn't need those nightmares."

Gilbert shifted on the bed again, placing his head in Matthew's lap. "I'd rather us both play hide and seek with your missing eye than just you by yourself. I mean, what else are

boyfriends for?" He smiled when he felt Matthew chuckle beneath him. "And you? Giving me nightmares? I think the Easter Bunny has a better chance at that." He yelped when Matthew swatted him on the shoulder with his brush.

"You've never seen me without my prosthetics, and I doubt you'd want to, so how would you know?"

Matthew's tone was light, playful, but Gilbert found himself taken aback. "You doubt I'd want to?"

"Well, would you?" Matthew asked, laughing some more. "I wouldn't be hurt if you said no. It's not the easiest thing to look at."

Gilbert sat up as Matthew began to gather his hair into a ponytail. Matthew had missed a few strands at the back, so he gathered them and gently guided them into Matthew's hair tie.

"Is that why you didn't come and get me?"

"Huh?"

"It's why you didn't come to get me, isn't it? Because you thought I wouldn't want to see you without them."

Gilbert saw Matthew tense just as he pulled open the drawer to his nightstand. "No, I—" he hesitated, placing the brush inside and slowly shutting it closed. "I just didn't want you to…"

Gilbert took his hand from the handle of the drawer, pulled him closer so that they were face to face. Matthew's cheeks had flushed red. "Didn't want me to what?" he asked. "Freak the hell out?"

Both laughed.

"Basically," said Matthew.

"You know I know they're fake, right?"

"Ha ha," he said, giving Gilbert's knee a little shove. "But c'mon, Gil, imagine if I'd come in here to get you with one eye less than I left with." His next words were muffled as he bowed his head. "Are you really telling me that wouldn't have freaked you out?"

"I'd've been surprised, sure," he said, pulling Matthew into an embrace. "But then I would've laughed my ass off and helped my one-eyed boyfriend find his other eye."

Matthew's cheek was hot against Gilbert's bare shoulder. "You sure about that?"

"Positive." Gilbert felt Matthew sigh into him, though it was a sound he couldn't quite discern. "Hey," he said, pulling back a bit. "Look at me." The irony of that sentence was never lost on the both of them, but whenever Gilbert said it, there was a mutual understanding of what the words really meant.

Let me see you.

So Matthew lifted his head, cheeks burning with shame because it had been a long time since he'd felt so insecure in front of the person who was always reminding him of his worth.

And Gilbert could see it, the embarrassment Matthew felt. Gilbert saw it in his flushed cheeks, in the way his Adam's apple bobbed as he swallowed, in how slowly his eyes left the sheets to meet his own. He brought a gentle hand to the side of Matthew's face.

“I know I've never seen you without them,” he said softly, “but that doesn't mean I don't want to.” Gilbert watched as Matthew frowned, though it was clear from his expression that he wasn't upset, but instead confused.

“You…” Matthew paused, his heart beating a bit faster than normal because...*what*? “You *want* to see me without them?”

“Well, yeah. I mean, I don't want you to take them out just because I’m a nosy shit,” he laughed. “But I dunno, I think it'd be pretty awesome to see how you put them in, or take them out, or clean them or…” he trailed off when he noticed Matthew’s lips part, expecting words to come out. But they didn’t. Matthew's cheeks grew two shades darker. “Shit, I'm sorry,” Gilbert said hurriedly, “that's creepy as fuck, isn't it? Forget I said—”

“No, i-it's not!” Matthew rushed to answer, finding his voice as he heard Gilbert beginning to panic. “It's not,” he said again, bringing his hand to cover Gilbert's at his cheek. “I just…no one but my family has ever seen me without them, so…”

Gilbert's heart sunk in his chest as Matthew's eyes turned glassy. “Matt,” he breathed, feeling as if the wind had been knocked straight out of him. He stroked soothingly at the wisps of hair that framed his forehead, “It's okay, you don't have to—”

“No,” Matthew said, and he hated that he was being so confusing, crying when he was happy, becoming mute when he had so much he wanted to say. So he wrapped his arms around Gilbert's waist, pulled him close, because there was no way that could be misinterpreted. “I'm just so relieved,” he said, words rushing from his lips and crashing into Gilbert's chest. “You're right,” he said, blinking back the tears as he pulled away because he'd be damned if he worried Gilbert any further. “I was scared to let you see me without them. I didn't think you'd want to.”

“...But why, Mattie?”

“Because...it's not *normal*. I mean,” he laughed softly, "People are supposed to have eyes, Gil, not empty spaces where their eyes are supposed to be. If people had no problem with that, then fake eyes wouldn't even be a thing, right? I just...didn't wanna make you uncomfortable.”

“Mattie…come here.” Gilbert left the edge of the bed for its center, pulling Matthew along with him. “The only thing about you that makes me anywhere *near* uncomfortable,” he said, “is the fact that you even agreed to be with me in the first place. I mean, don't get me wrong, being with you makes me happy as hell, but at the same time, it's kind of intimidating.”

“What?” Matthew huffed out a little laugh. “What are you talking about?”

“I'm serious. Did you forget I *tricked* you into hanging out with me? I couldn't even be honest with you from the start, but you're still here, and I feel like the luckiest fucking guy in the world. I get to be with a guy who's kind and funny and smart as hell, and fucking beautiful on top of that.”

Gilbert caught Matthew's chin with his finger before he could hide the way his scarlet turned maroon.

“Trust me, all the reasons why I love you aren't gonna just magically disappear if I see you without your prosthetics in. You know that, right?” Gilbert was answered again with glassy eyes, but this time a little smile was there to accompany them. “You're just as much you without them as you are with them. This is *your* normal. Screw what society says that's supposed to look like."

Matthew's lips trembled as Gilbert brought their foreheads to touch, and he nodded when Gilbert asked if he could hear what he was saying, tears spilling over. And Gilbert brushed his nose against Matthew’s as he wiped at his cheeks, placed soft kisses on his neck and jaw.

“How many times do you think we can make each other cry in a weekend?” Gilbert whispered into his neck. And Matthew laughed, partially because it tickled.

“Hopefully not enough that we need to keep count,” he replied, shaking his head. Gilbert pulled away from Matthew's neck only for Matthew to pull him back in for a kiss on the lips, hand at the back Gilbert's head. “I, um…” Matthew breathed against his lips as he pulled back a bit. “If you still wanted to see how they work, I can...show you now, if you want.”

“Really?” said Gilbert. “Right now?”

“Yeah,” Matthew laughed sheepishly, surprised by how genuinely excited Gilbert sounded. “I only need a few seconds to get one out.”

“Seriously? I thought it might be a longer process than that.”

Matthew shook his head. “It's pretty straightforward.”

“Then hell yeah I'd like to see.” Gilbert froze as Matthew smiled at him, pulling a few strands of hair behind his ear they way he always did when he was nervous. “But only if *you* want me to.”

“I do,” Matthew said, “But I'm gonna scoot back a little so I’m not in your face.”

“Okay,” Gilbert snickered, letting him do so. Gilbert could sense Matthew's anxiousness, and he hated that he was responsible for it, but at the same time, he felt so incredibly happy that Matthew felt he could share such an intimate part of himself with him. “I like when you're in my face, though, just so you know,” he added, eager to take some of Matthew's discomfort away. The response that he got was more than worth it.

“Same here. Now, shut up before you miss it.” Matthew grinned when he heard Gilbert snort, feeling himself relax. “So, they're pretty much just huge contact lenses,” he said, fingers coming to the outer corner of his left eye. “So when I wanna take them out I just…”

Gilbert watched him pull down on the skin beneath his lash line, applying what looked like a gentle pressure with the tips of his fingers. His other hand came to catch the prosthetic as it slid out beneath his lid. And Gilbert was now seeing the horror that Matthew insisted he wouldn't want to see.

Except it wasn't horrific at all. Gilbert watched as Matthew blinked a few times, seeing smooth, pink flesh where his eye once was. No, there was nothing about this sight, about the boy who meant so much to him, that would give him nightmares. But Gilbert had already known that. Matthew's face had once again flushed, this time reaching his ears.

“Like I said,” he spoke after a short pause, “pretty straightforward…” He laughed, feeling like he should probably have more to say, but not really knowing what else *to* say. “I, um, clean them every three weeks. Usually just with plain water. Oh, and I get them polished twice a year, just so they don't get dull. Other than that I don't really have to do much else. When I was younger there was definitely a learning curve, but now it's just second nature, I guess.”

Gilbert noticed that Matthew wasn't facing him as he talked, and he didn't like it. He moved forward a few inches, brought his arms around Matthew at either side. “Hey,” he said softly, lifting Matthew's head again at his chin. “I'm up here.”

Matthew huffed out a soft, shy laugh, the thumping of his heart echoing through his chest and into his ears. His breaths were shaky, face warm as he took in Gilbert's closeness. He could feel Gilbert's eyes on him, on the part of himself he'd learned to keep hidden from the world, and couldn't help the way he stopped breathing as Gilbert spoke again, not knowing what he would say next.

“You know,” he began, “There aren't many people who can say they’ve got a cute, one-eyed boyfriend. But I can.”

Then came another huff from Matthew, a sigh of relief that turned into laughter as his lips curled into a smile. Why had he expected anything less? “God, how can you flirt with me right now?” he said, his disbelief growing as he said it aloud. “When I...”

“Mm?”

At Gilbert’s prodding his smile grew, and he shook his head, finishing his sentence despite himself. “When I look like...this?” And suddenly Gilbert was pulling him onto his lap. “Hey!”

“Matthew,” he said, and Matthew shuddered at the way Gilbert said his name, so used to answering to “Matt” or “Mattie” that he sometimes forgot how satisfying it was, to hear Gilbert's tongue wrestle with the letters 't’ and 'h,” molding the middle of his name into something softer than it should be. “How can I not?”

And Matthew stayed silent, hands braced on Gilbert's shoulders, his shirtless shoulders, mouth running dry.

“How can I not,” he said, “when your face is so cute and red like this?” Matthew still had no words for him, but...God, Gilbert never wanted Matthew to stop smiling at him like this. “And when you smile like that?”

“Gil...”

“You're so fucking beautiful,” he said, “every part of you.” Matthew sucked in a breath as Gilbert's lips pressed to his jaw, his nose, to the part of himself he'd lost to sick chance. And Matthew felt as if he'd been wiped clean, of his shame, of his fear, of all the doubts that claimed him when he lie awake at night and wondered if this life was really his. If all the happiness he'd been given was his reality, or just a long, long dream that his body refused to wake from.

But no.

It wasn't a dream.

Gilbert's face prickled with warmth as Matthew's lips took his, palms flat against Matthew's back as arms came around his neck. Matthew's lips were firm, certain as they moved along his, and Gilbert could feel his limbs loosen. He opened his eyes when Matthew pulled away, a soft “wait” whispered against him.

“Sorry to ruin the mood,” he said with an awkward laugh, unballling his fist where his prosthetic sat in the palm of his hand, “but I'd rather not lose this twice in one night.”

Gilbert smirked as he began slipping his eye back into place. “I dunno, I’m kinda liking this new foreplay of yours.”

Matthew blinked a few times to make sure it was secure, then sent a pout Gilbert's way. “Dork.”

“Yeah,” Gilbert said with a grin, pulling Matthew into him once more. “That's me.”

Matthew smiled against Gilbert's lips as he claimed them again, sighing when Gilbert's hand trailed down his back. And here they were again, freely exploring each other's bodies, losing themselves in the sensations and sounds they'd long become familiar with.

Gilbert’s hands at his back were strong as they kissed, bringing them chest to chest. Matthew was first to pierce through the silence, a soft moan slipping from his lips and into Gilbert's mouth as he felt fingers slip beneath his shirt, tracing up his spine. And then Gilbert's lips were gone from his, his head ducking down to plant kisses against his collarbone, his neck, his shoulder.

Gilbert breathed in the noises Matthew made as if they were life itself. One of Matthew's hands was gripping at his shoulder, the other carding through his hair, and oh, he could feel Matthew against his stomach, feel his own arousal tenting through his sweats.

It certainly wasn't the first time he'd found himself straddling Gilbert, and so it most certainly wasn't Matthew's first time feeling Gilbert against him. But this time, it was different, and it was becoming harder for Matthew to breathe because he hadn't realized how much more *incredible* this could feel without a thick layer of denim between them. Yes, for once they were both without jeans, and Matthew's brain was going haywire, because never before had he felt Gilbert this clearly. Each time Gilbert moved to place a kiss somewhere along his neck, Matthew could feel him growing that much harder, and suddenly the heat beneath his cheeks was spreading down the rest of his body.

“Gil,” he breathed, and instantly, Gilbert's lips disappeared from his skin.

Each time he and Matthew touched each other like this, Gilbert made sure to never let his mind stray too far, because as good as it felt to be with Matthew like this, there was nothing that mattered more to him than Matthew’s comfort level. So he listened to his breaths, noticed when his body trembled, or when his movements became less fluid. All of these were signs for Gilbert to check in, ask if they should stop or continue.

But what Gilbert listened for more than anything, was his own name. It didn't matter how sweetly or breathlessly Matthew said it, when he heard Matthew call to him, he stopped.

“You okay?” he asked softly as he sat up. “We can stop.”

“No,” said Matthew, and Gilbert’s eyes grew wide as Matthew grabbed at the bottom of his T-shirt, pulling it up and over his head. He swallowed hard as it was tossed to the floor. “It was just...getting kinda hot.”

“Oh.” It was all Gilbert could say as Matthew settled back against him, ears burning when he realized that the little freckles at Matthew's collarbone weren't the only ones he had. A few more had found a home on his shoulders. And holy fuck, it was cute. “Are you...sure you're okay?”

“I'm okay,” he said, and Gilbert shivered when again they came chest to chest, skin touching skin as Matthew leaned forward to kiss him. “Are...you okay?”

“Yeah,” he rasped.

Gilbert pressed him close, groaned as he felt Matthew against him again, hard as rock. Matthew was breathing against him now, shallow breaths along the side of his neck, and just when Gilbert thought his pulse couldn't climb any higher, Matthew *moved*, hips rolling forward.

“Oh my God,” Gilbert groaned, hands falling to Matthew's hips. And the noise Matthew made when he responded in kind was nothing short of obscene. “Mattie,” he gasped as Matthew moved against him again, gripping his sides to stop him from moving because fuck, he was so goddamn close. Even just the sight of Matthew's flushed cheeks, his half-lidded eyes, his lips moist with Gilbert's own spit, had him teetering on the edge. “If we keep...I'm gonna—”

Matthew's voice was thick on Gilbert’s ears when he next spoke, heavy with arousal, and before he knew it his hands were trembling.

"I know," said Matthew. He could feel Gilbert shaking, but so was he. "Me too..."

And a few seconds passed as they both sat frozen against each other, neither saying a word. The silence was just long enough to pull them from the depths of their haze, and slowly, they floated back to the surface. A moment of clarity.

"Matt," Gilbert said, mouth dry. His own voice was low, husky on his own ears, and he swallowed, steadying his breathing. He wouldn't allow himself to slip under again, to bring Matthew down with him without knowing whether or not he wanted to follow. "We can still stop."

Matthew licked his lips. "I..." he said, "I still don't think I'm ready to..."

"Okay," Gilbert said, his grip on Matthew becoming something more gentle. He brought his lips to Matthew's forehead. "Let's st—"

"B-But," Matthew said, "if we just..."

"Matt," he said again, soft, and Matthew knew it was because he'd bowed his head, but he just couldn't help it, because he hadn't even known he'd be fixing his lips to say what he was about to say, and it embarrassed him. And now Gilbert's hand was at his cheek, coaxing him out of hiding. “I'm here,” he said, “I'm listening.”

Matthew's face was red as he raised his head, and again Gilbert's breath caught in his throat as Matthew shifted against him ever so slightly, and yet the way he'd moved, slow, careful, a bit timid, it was too deliberate to have been a mistake.

"I..."

It was so embarrassing, how hard it was for Matthew to form a coherent sentence. It was embarrassing to think of how confusing he must be right now, and he felt ashamed because his words weren't enough and he was using his body to say what he couldn't. But most of all, it was embarrassing to realize that although he still didn't feel like he was ready to be with Gilbert in *that* way, he liked what his body was doing, liked what Gilbert's body was doing to his, and he didn't want it to stop.

"Hey," Gilbert said, bringing his arms around the other. "We don't have to rush this. Let's just sit here for a minute, okay?"

"Okay," he answered softly, welcoming the slight weight of Gilbert's chin settling at his back. Matthew practically melted into him, returning his embrace with an exhale. No, Matthew thought as he breathed in the scent of Gilbert's warm skin, he didn't want to rush this. But...

"We can stop right here, right now, no questions asked."

But he didn't want that either.

There was a long pause before Matthew answered, a whisper at Gilbert's ear. “Can I tell you something?”

“Anything,” he said. He went to pull away so that he could see Matthew clearly, but then Matthew's hands were pressing at his back, pulling him back again.

"Not with you looking right at me,” he mumbled at Gilbert's shoulder, gave a little laugh. "Then I'll never get it out."

“Okay,” Gilbert chuckled against him, pressed his lips to Matthew's shoulder. He could feel Matthew's heartbeat quickening again, and ran a gentle hand down his back. “Tell me what's on your mind.”

Matthew breathed in, feeling his face go warm with color. “I've been thinking…”

“About what?”

“About us doing more than kissing.”

Matthew felt Gilbert tense around him, but he could tell it was from shock rather than discomfort. And Matthew couldn't blame him; he couldn't really figure out how to say it less bluntly (blunt for Matthew anyway), and it was exactly why he was hiding his face at Gilbert's back.

"Y-Yeah?" came Gilbert's answer.

"Yeah," he said, just above a whisper. "I...think about it a lot actually. And..."

And now Gilbert's pulse was climbing to meet Matthew's, not that he could actually tell whose was whose anymore.

"Some of those things I'm fine with just thinking about right now, but others, I actually want to...do." Matthew pulled back then, and Gilbert did the same, the two coming face to face. "With you."

Matthew's face was flushed a deep, deep red, and Gilbert watched in awe as he swallowed away his nerves.

"I really like kissing you. So I wanna explore what else might really like when I'm with you. And find out what kind of things *you* like." He laughed sheepishly, adorably, and Gilbert felt his own face grow impossibly hotter. "Am I making any sense?"

"Yeah," Gilbert said, failing to hide the surprise in his voice, which had become much too soft. He cleared his throat and repeated, this time at a normal volume. "Yeah, completely. But," he went on, "are you sure you're okay with us going further than we have?"

Matthew felt the heat of Gilbert's hand as it came to rest against the small of his back, and nodded. "I mean, all this time I've been nervous about going all the way, but sex isn't just the 'all the way' part, right? There are things we can do that don't involve...you know, penetration."

He cringed internally because God, that sounded so clinical and yet he didn't know how else he *could* say it without feeling like he'd need to inhale a bottle of mouthwash straight after. "God, I'm bad at this," he groaned.

"No you're not." And when Matthew groaned again, as if to say, whatever, you're just being nice, Gilbert repeated himself, placing a kiss against his lips. "No penetration. I'm with you there. I'm nowhere near ready for that."

Matthew smiled and gave a small nod. "I knew we'd be on the same page."

"Virgin telepathy?" Gilbert grinned back at him, and they both laughed.

"Well, then that's settled."

"Mmhm," Gilbert hummed, reaching out to move a few strands of hair behind Matthew's ear. "Now...what was it that you *did* want to do?"

"Oh, right," he laughed, feeling his ears grow warm. "Well, I...I want us to...touch each other more."

And he felt like sinking into the floor because that was so vague and so stupidly, stupidly obvious and *God* it was so unfair how his thoughts could be so effortlessly filthy when he wanted them to be and yet when it came time to actually turn those thoughts into words, it was like pulling teeth. But Gilbert was so incredibly patient with him, hummed in understanding, placed yet another kiss at his forehead.

"Let's try this," he said, paused to bring Matthew along with him as he sat back against the headboard. Matthew let out an inaudible sigh as Gilbert's arms came around him on either side, his own body fitting snugly between Gilbert's legs. He leaned back against Gilbert's chest, brought his hands to cover Gilbert's where they had settled against his stomach.

Gilbert knew Matthew would be more comfortable this way, in a position where Gilbert couldn't see his face as they spoke. It put them on even ground. Because when Gilbert thought about it, it really wasn't all that fair that Gilbert could see Matthew's every facial expression, while Matthew was left with nothing.

It wasn't like it was in the movies, where the tragically and romantically blind character would know everything about someone's appearance once they felt the contours of their face. Matthew would never know the exact moment when Gilbert's face began to flush red, or know how stupid he looked when his brain refused to work with him, leaving his mouth silently ajar as he floundered for the right words.

Gilbert, on the other hand, got to see so many of Matthew's little quirks and fidgets. And he loved them so much. He loved to watch Matthew's cheeks change hue, loved the way he'd nibble at his lip and mess with the short hairs by his ears when he was nervous. But Matthew didn't have that, the instant gratification that came with seeing someone react to what he was saying. When they talked so intimately like this, Gilbert knew it must've been a lot harder for Matthew than himself, understood how vulnerable Matthew must've felt, trying to figure out

what he wanted to say, all the while knowing that Gilbert's eyes were on him, taking in his every emotion as he wrestled with his innermost thoughts.

So in the end, it didn't matter how much Gilbert loved the sight those pretty pink cheeks. Because right now it wasn't just about him. It was about Matthew too. Making him feel heard instead of merely watched.

"Is this better?" he asked softly.

Matthew sighed again, nuzzled his head against the broad chest at his back. "Yeah..." he whispered. "Sorry."

"For what?" Gilbert said. "No reason to be." But Matthew sighed again.

“I don't know why this is so...I *want* this, Gil, so why am I so...”

"It's not just you."

Matthew felt Gilbert take one of his hands, slowly bringing it up and past his ear, guiding it to the side of Gilbert's neck. His breath stalled as Gilbert pressed down, pressing Matthew's hand into his skin. Gilbert's pulse. Thumping beneath his finger tips. Racing.

"Can you feel that?" he asked. "I know you can't always tell, but I still get nervous too. No matter how long I've been around you. Especially when I'm with you...like this."

Matthew shivered, feeling Gilbert's voice reverberate through his back, against his fingers. "It's...so fast."

"Yeah..." he said, bringing his free hand to Matthew's little ponytail, slipping off the tie that held it in place. He leaned in as Matthew's hair fell free, still smelling faintly of his shampoo, and sighed into it.

They sat there for a little while, Gilbert's nose burried in Matthew's sweet smelling hair, Matthew's hand still at Gilbert's neck. And as each second passed, Matthew felt the pulse at his fingers continue to climb. It was so fast, so impossibly fast, and suddenly Matthew's mouth was going dry.

"Pretty ridiculous, huh?" he said suddenly, laughing softly into Matthew's hair. "But this is what you do to me." Matthew let out another breath, feeling that searing warmth return to his stomach. "Hearing you say you wanted more of me, like I want more of you..."

Matthew swallowed hard, feeling his own heart begin to race. And God, he felt so warm, his face, his body, his everything. But it was such a good feeling. So good. Feeling this pulse beneath his finger tips, knowing Gilbert was just as nervous as he was. As *excited* as he was. He exhaled again, breath uneven as Gilbert's next words ran across his skin in his own language, the little hairs at his neck raising on end. And when Gilbert repeated himself, this time in English, Matthew bit down on his lip, eyes fluttering shut.

"I can't help it."

He curled his fingers around Gilbert's, coaxed his hand back down so that he could be held again, encircled in both his arms. Gilbert's chest was warm at his back as they sat, rising and falling with his shallow breaths. Matthew could actually feel his heartbeat now, thumping at his back, faster than before, and suddenly his own breaths were growing short, the ache between his legs returning full force.

The heat between them was unbearable, and all Matthew could think of was how amazing Gilbert was, because he could feel Gilbert's want for him with every fiber in his being, and yet Gilbert still hadn't moved, hadn't moved a single inch because Matthew had yet to actually *say* anything. It didn't matter how quickly his heart raced, or how unsteady his breaths became, or how obvious Matthew's arousal was. For Gilbert, that wasn't enough and Matthew knew it. Gilbert needed to *hear* it, straight from his lips, not just from his body. This was Gilbert giving him the floor now, letting him decide if this was really what he wanted. But by then Matthew had already decided.

He turned his head just enough to feel Gilbert's breath on his lips, their mouths mere inches apart. "I do want more of you," he said, and Gilbert moaned as their lips met, feeling the words run down his throat like warm honey. Their kisses were wet, unabashed, and when Matthew broke away it was to finish what he'd started.

"Ask me again," Matthew said.

"Ask you...?" Gilbert replied, voice sounding far away, his mind caught between where he would place his lips next. Maybe at Matthew's neck. Maybe just behind his ear. Shit, who said he had to choose just one or the other?

"Ask me," he said, breath leaving him as Gilbert placed an open-mouthed kiss behind his ear, "what I want. I'll—" Another at his neck, tongue wet and warm. Matthew gasped, shuddered.

"You'll?" Gilbert whispered.

"I'll answer properly this time."

Gilbert held back a shudder of his own at the sound of Matthew's voice, breathy, and yet void of the timidness it had held just some minutes before.

"Ask me again," Matthew repeated, more firm, more needy. And just like that, Gilbert was hard again.

"*Was*," he began, stopping himself once he realized that wasn't the language he'd intended to use. He breathed in again, out. "What other things would you like us to try?"

Matthew very nearly whimpered at the feeling of Gilbert's breath at his neck, hotter now. Heavier. He wet his lips as he went to speak. "Oral," he breathed, but in his current state, he realized, it wasn't very satisfying on his tongue. "Blowjobs," he corrected, face on fire, but pleasantly so. "Ha—Handjobs."

"Fuck," Gilbert whispered, so quietly that he wasn't even sure if he'd actually said it, or simply thought it. To hear Matthew saying such words, hearing them panted out so helplessly,

it was so unexpected, so unbelievably erotic, and now there was a wet spot at his crotch, telling him just how much Matthew had gotten to him. "Yeah, I—" he gulped, "I can do both of those. Gladly."

Matthew could feel Gilbert again, stiff at his back, his arms tightening their grip. He took a deep breath. "Can I," he exhaled, a hand moving from Gilbert's knee and up towards his thigh, "start with you?"

"Holy shit," came Gilbert's response, wonderfully hoarse at Matthew's ear. Matthew began to move from his lap but Gilbert held him in place. “Wa-Wait,” he choked out.

Matthew's hand faltered at Gilbert's leg. “Do you...not want me to?” And Gilbert's fingers slipped between his faster than Matthew could even *begin* to think about what he might have done wrong.

“I want it so much it fucking hurts."

Matthew whimpered at how rough the voice on his ears was, how tightly Gilbert held him, how wet the kisses were at his neck. “Then...why?”

“Matt,” Gilbert's voice cracked as he said it, as he pressed himself at Matthew's back. “Can't you feel me?”

“Yes,” Matthew whined, pressing back to meet him.

“The second you touch me, I'm done. It's fucking over,” he said. “I don't want this to be over yet.” Slowly, he loosened his hold on Matthew, dragged a hand down his stomach.

“Gil…”

“Let me take care of you. Please. I don't want anything else.”

“Oh my God,” Matthew gasped, feeling Gilbert's fingertips tracing the little trail of hair just below his navel. He stopped just before the waistband.

“Please,” he said again, and he was answered with a soft moan. “All I need from you is a yes. That's all I need, *Schatz*.”

“*Putain*,” he finally spoke, more breath than actual voice. “Yes,” he cried, pulling his flannels down and off his hips, and Gilbert had never felt more blessed in all his life.

Gilbert helped him, yanked the pants further down when Matthew lifted himself from the bed, and as soon as Matthew wiggled them off his legs and onto the floor, he turned back around, lips crashing into Gilbert's.

"You too," Matthew whispered as he broke the kiss, his hand falling to Gilbert's hip, fingers pulling at the elastic.

Gilbert didn't even see his sweats hit the floor as he tossed them, too focused on Matthew's thighs and how tightly his briefs hugged his backside. It was where Gilbert's hands went first,

squeezing at soft, round cheeks as he took Matthew's lips again. Matthew groaned and moved forward, pushed at Gilbert's chest until his back hit the headboard, and settled himself back in Gilbert's lap. It was like slipping the last puzzle piece into place, and their voices overlapped when their erections met again.

With Gilbert's hands still cupping him from behind, Matthew put his own hands to use, taking the opportunity to explore more of Gilbert's bare skin. He'd never seen Gilbert so naked before, never felt these parts of Gilbert's body this way, so raw, so completely stripped. His hands roamed freely up Gilbert's sides, fingers running along his ribs, up his stomach, across his chest.

He couldn't get enough of it, how good it felt to prop his hands against Gilbert's broad shoulders. And Gilbert's thighs, God, they felt amazing, the muscles tensing under the weight of his body. That was where his hand fell next, for a handful of that taut muscle, his palm running along Gilbert's inner thigh. He broke away from Gilbert's lips and relished in the groan that came as his fingers ran along the junction of Gilbert's thigh and crotch.

"Gil," Matthew sighed, rutted against him. And Gilbert sucked in a breath when lithe fingers trailed down his stomach. "I wanna touch you too. Here."

"I—I'm too close. I'll come," he said, letting out another heavy breath when one of Matthew's fingers began circling his navel. He closed his eyes as he leaned forward, nose brushing along Matthew's. "I can't come yet. Don't want to. Not before you."

Matthew had to take a few moments to gather himself, mind going to mush as the word "come" left Gilbert's lips a second time. How much he wanted to see that.

"What if I kept you inside?" he whispered against Gilbert, feeling bold. "Touched you through your underwear?" He was answered with a breathy curse. "Would that be okay?"

Matthew's hand had started to rub his thigh, back and forth, back and forth. So close and yet not close enough. And now he was throbbing, his breaths coming short and fast. There was no doubt in his mind, if Matthew pulled him free, took him into his hand, he'd be done in ten seconds or less. But... if he just touched him from the outside, then maybe...

"You can tell me," he continued, pressed a kiss to the shell of Gilbert's ear, "when you're almost there and..." Another at his jaw. "I'll stop. I promise."

"*Gott*..." Matthew's face was heavily flushed as he pulled away, his eyes dazed, lips swollen from Gilbert's kisses. Utter perfection. It tightened the coil in his stomach, had him grabbing at Matthew's ass again just to see those lips part and let loose another moan.

"Is—" He lost his words to another of Gilbert's kisses, their tongues meeting. "Is that a yes?" he asked breathlessly. But he was only answered with more tongue and a tighter grip at his ass.

When Gilbert broke away, his breath was so heavy on his own ears that he could barely hear himself speak. "When I tell you to stop," he huffed, "nothing else is gonna matter but getting you off. That's what I wanna come to. You getting yours."

Matthew swallowed, licked his lips and leaned forward. "Okay," he said through a shiver. "Tell me when."

Slowly, Matthew's hand moved down and along his inner thigh, and Gilbert couldn't stop himself from holding his breath. Matthew was holding his too, and when his hand found the imprint of Gilbert's length, they both exhaled, another groan spilling out from Gilbert's throat.

Matthew pressed his palm to the bulge, lips falling open in awe. He was so hard. He'd felt it before against his own erection, but actually feeling it in his hand was completely different. He'd never actually *held* this part of Gilbert before and his face grew hotter as he moved experimentally, listening to the feedback Gilbert gave him, tailoring his movements accordingly. Matthew had never done this before, thought he'd be more anxious, but the more he moved and the more noises Gilbert made, the more his confidence grew.

Gilbert wasn't sure if Matthew realized how hot he sounded, huffing softly and sweetly at his ear, asking him if this was alright. Gilbert answered him with roaming hands, with all the noises he couldn't stop, voice climbing higher and higher into his throat. And when Matthew's fingers slowly wrapped around him, Gilbert's voice came rushing forward, toes curled into the sheets.

"Ma–Matt," he said, jaw clenched, and sighed graciously when Matthew instantly pulled his hand away.

Matthew felt his skin tingle at the way Gilbert said his name, the warning sounding more like a beg, a beg riding a fine line between stop and continue. But Matthew knew better, knew which Gilbert actually wanted. He pushed back Gilbert's bangs from his forehead, leaned in so that their foreheads touched. Gilbert tilted his head just enough to place a deep kiss against his lips, his silent thanks as he tried to push back against the release his body so clearly needed.

"I like the way you feel," Matthew said as he pulled back. "In my hand."

Gilbert swallowed, felt more precum dampen his underwear. A few seconds of silence passed before he could finally push out a strained, "*Ja*?"

"Mm-hm."

The little hum Matthew answered with was shameless, full of lust, as if he wanted Gilbert to know just how long he'd been wanting to do that, how much he'd enjoyed it, and how willing he was to do it again. It pushed Gilbert right back to the very edge, and he loved it, this feeling of wrestling with himself, denying himself. Because he didn't deserve to come yet, not until Matthew did.

"Okay?" Matthew asked when Gilbert let out another shaky sigh. He held himself just a little above Gilbert's lap, his knees pressed into the mattress. He dared not sit down, not with Gilbert so obviously close to unravelling. "Need a minute?"

"No," he answered, the word coming out so much softer than he'd intended, so much more whiny.

He could feel the heat of Matthew above him and it was excruciating, so fucking incredible, feeling it radiate from between Matthew's thighs. He wanted to feel Matthew against him again, pull Matthew down into him, but his breaths were too erratic, his loins much too tight, and he needed to get it back under control. His "no" had been nothing but a poorly hidden "yes," and Matthew knew it just as much as Gilbert, which was why he'd yet to lower himself back down.

"No?"

He looked away when Matthew's lips curled into something coy. Those lips would *end* him, he thought, sqeezing his eyes shut.

"Just...a few seconds," he said, hands coming to Matthew's hips for fear that the heat between them would disappear. "Stay."

It was not a command, but a plea, and it had Matthew melting from the inside out. His arms came around Gilbert's neck, their crotches nearly grazing as Matthew leaned forward and placed a kiss at his cheek, another at his jaw, three more down the length of his neck.

The kisses were soft, soothing, and Gilbert found his muscles growing less rigid, his breaths a little quieter, the searing heat in his stomach less intense. And he sighed again with relief, allowed himself to enjoy the light touches. But more than anything, he enjoyed the feeling of that pressure building anew, Matthew's kisses turning into light sucks at his skin.

Suddenly Matthew felt the hands at his hips guiding him downwards, and he pulled his lips from Gilbert's neck to croon as they connected, Gilbert thrusting up against him. Matthew rocked back into him, and their breaths grew heavy as they formed a steady rhythm, each thrust of their hips more fervent than the last.

"You sound...amazing," Matthew whispered against him, and he really did. His panting, his little grunts, the way his voice cracked when it reached heights it normally wouldn't—Matthew loved what it did to him.

Gilbert's hands moved from Matthew's hips to his ass, and he felt himself color at the praise. He pushed Matthew back gently, prompting him to pull away from Gilbert's neck. And there was that face again, expression hazed, lips slightly ajar. He tucked a few curls behind Matthew's ear. Absolutely gorgeous.

"It's not about me anymore," he said, and Matthew shuddered as one of Gilbert's hands came back to caress his thigh.

"You," he breathed, "you weren't kidding, huh?"

"Nope."

He wasted not even a second, his hand slipping between Matthew's thighs to palm at him through his briefs. Matthew whimpered, spread his legs wider to give him more access, and Gilbert couldn't stop the noise that slipped from his own lips upon realizing just how worked

up Matthew was. "You're so," he breathed out, cupping at him over damp cotton. *Wet*, he wanted to say. *Hard*. But instead all he could manage was a shaky, "Wow."

Wow. Matthew sighed as the word drifted into his ear. There truly was no other way to describe it. This. Him. His hips jerked forward to press himself further into Gilbert's hand. Gilbert pressed back, dropped his head to pepper kisses at each stray freckle along at Matthew's shoulder. "Gil..." A hum against his skin, more pressure between his legs. "Gil," he said again, a soft whine. "Please."

"What are you asking me for, *Schatz*?"

"*Touche-moi. Je t'en prie*," he said, and now the hand between his thighs was moving up towards the waistband of his briefs, a finger pulling at the band.

Matthew bit his lip, not recognizing his own voice. And God, now his brain couldn't decide which language to commit to. English, French, it didn't matter which he spoke, neither was going to hide how lewd he sounded. If anything, slipping into French had made it worse, his words slurred, tongue loose. But he wouldn't even try to hide it anymore, how much he wanted this. He wanted to tell Gilbert to stop teasing him, but how could he when it felt so good? When the anticipation was crackling along his skin like static? Gilbert whispered his name, and Matthew couldn't help but respond, couldn't stop the way whimpers crept up through his throat even with his mouth held shut.

Matthew sounded so good. His birdie sounded so good, singing so sweetly for him like this. Nothing could match the way Matthew sounded in this moment. Gilbert ran his hand along Matthew's inner thigh, and felt him tremble, cupped him below again. He was panting now, hips rolling forward for even the slightest bit of friction. And Gilbert let him have it. "You're so beautiful," he said, and Matthew let out another soft noise.

"*Touch* me," he said again, so desperate, so beautifully broken, and Gilbert wasn't going to deny him, or himself, any further. He pulled down Matthew's underwear just enough to watch him spring free, and took Matthew into his hand. Matthew cried out with relief.

Gilbert couldn't help but quiver at the sight of Matthew in the palm of his hand, flushed red, weeping. He was absolutely mesmorized. Matthew was this hard because of *him*. No one else but *him* could stir this reaction in Matthew, and that knowledge alone had him struggling to breathe.

His touch was light at first, cautious as he tried to get Matthew used to the feel of his hand. His fingertips ran along the underside of Matthew's length and he twitched in Gilbert's palm. He swallowed thickly at the sight, felt his heart quicken when he saw more precum dribble forward, wet and glistening in warm, muted candlelight. It was hot as all—

"*Fuck*," he said, the word shaky on his breath, hand hurrying upwards to coat his fingers and palm in the natural lube. He licked his lip at the sight. "Matt, I need you to tell me straight. Do you want my mouth or my hand?"

Matthew felt himself throb at the question, at how closely Gilbert's lips were to his ear. But he didn't hesitate. Gilbert's touch felt so good and he didn't want it to stop. "H-Hand," he

huffed. "I want your hand."

"*Sehr gut*," he grunted. "Now I know what to do next time."

Matthew's mind went white at hearing those last two words. Next time. There was going to be a next time. Together, like this. His mouth fell open, and immediately Gilbert was there to meet him in a slow melding of their lips. Matthew's fingers trembled at the base of his spine and suddenly...

Gilbert broke their kiss at the sensation of a warm wetness pooling into his palm. He looked down eagerly, expecting to see that Matthew had finished. But it was...more precum, slick and warm against his fingers. "God*damn*," he choked out.

A flush swept down Matthew's body like wildfire. This was more than even he was used to. "Sor—"

Gilbert wasn't going to allow him to finish that, wrapped his fist around Matthew and dragged it upwards to hear his breath catch. "Listen to that," he said, making a show of how slowly he came back down, of the sounds that were made as he did so. "So hot."

Matthew's teeth clamped down on his bottom lip, desperate to maintain even the slightest semblance of control. But he was clearly fighting a losing battle, and again his mind was taken by a blinding white. His breaths. Gilbert's breaths. The heat of Gilbert's hand. Oh God. Oh God oh God oh *God*. It felt so...so fucking *good*. So... "Fff—"

Gilbert's ears perked up, and he swallowed, sweat at his brow as he felt Matthew's nails dig into his back.

"Fff—uhh—"

So close, Gilbert thought, just a little more.

Gilbert's hand disappeared suddenly, and Matthew made a pitiful noise. He went to protest, but froze at the sound of Gilbert's mouth at his ear. He could hear it clearly, the wet, slurping sounds Gilbert's tongue was making. And yet...he couldn't feel anything at all. He gasped, face going beet red. "A-Are you..."

Gilbert pulled his fingers from mouth with an obscene *pop* and licked his lips, hand coming down to grip Matthew again.

Matthew shuddered at how wet his hold was now that his fingers were covered in a mix of them both. He couldn't deny how hot it was. "I—" A kiss at his shoulder. "I have lotion," he panted.

"S'fine," he slurred, hand slowly gliding down with ease, palm tickled by wirey blonde hairs once he reached the very base. Matthew groaned graciously for the movement, however painstakingly slow. "Wasn't just for the lube," he said softly at his ear, a blush creeping down Matthew's neck. "I wanted to taste you too." A squeeze, a twist of his wrist, and then—

"Ah—" A gasp. "*Fuck.*"

It was quiet, but unmistakeable. It was just as beautiful as the first time he'd said it. But in English, it hit him even harder, knowing that Matthew no longer had the will to filter himself with words he thought Gilbert didn't understand. He nearly came right then and there. Then Matthew's hand was at the back of his head, pulling him in for another kiss. It caught Gilbert off gaurd, left his face burning as he sped up his hand.

Gilbert's tongue was salty against Matthew's, but he'd expected as much. It should've been gross, and maybe it would've been if he wasn't so close to falling apart. But right now, it was intoxicating, tasting himself on Gilbert's tongue. Knowing that Gilbert had *wanted* the taste of him on his tongue. A sound came from the back of Gilbert's throat, something rough, something that went straight to the aching in Matthew's stomach.

Gilbert lost himself in everything Matthew gave him, their kisses messy, all tongue and teeth and spit. And when Matthew pulled away to cry out, Gilbert breathed a warning at his shoulder.

"I'm—" he said, choking back a groan as Matthew moved against him. It came anyway when his own hips jerked forward without his say, the friction heavenly. "I'm gonna finish you off," he said, gripping Matthew tighter in his hand.

"*Yes*," he said, and Gilbert was in awe of how so innocent a word could sound like utter sin.

"Gonna," Gilbert licked his lips, looked up from his busy hand to Matthew's beautifully red face. "Gonna watch you come."

Matthew's head fell back when Gilbert quickened his pace, a long, low moan reaching the ceiling. It was so much better than anything he could have ever imagined, felt nothing like all the times he'd done this alone. Feeling Gilbert touch him in this way, grip him, his movements so deliberate, it was indescribable. They shared another wet kiss, saliva stringing from both their lips as Gilbert pulled away.

And then, just when Matthew thought he couldn't get anymore wound up, thought he couldn't be anymore overwhelmed, Gilbert began to murmur at his ear, telling him how perfect he was, how much Matthew deserved to be touched like this, held like this. Perfect, so perfect, so fucking perfect, he was saying, and when Gilbert took his hand, when his tongue returned to its roots, therein began Matthew's end.

"G—Gi—" Matthew began to gasp out his name, but it morphed into something else. "*God*."

And as far as Matthew was concerned, in this moment, in this room, between these arms, beneath this gaze, there was no difference between the two.

He was losing all sense of the world around him, unable to focus on anything outside of how *good* he felt, how good *Gilbert* felt against him, around him. Everything, all of him, had Matthew slipping further and further away. Gilbert's desire rubbing against him, his voice in Matthew's ears—it was becoming too much, and Matthew knew it wouldn't be much longer.

How many times had Matthew thought about this? How many times had he imagined what Gilbert would sound like on the edge of climax? What it would feel like when *he* lost

himself, with Gilbert watching? He knew it was too many times to count.

But now…

Now there was no need for him to wonder anymore. Because Gilbert's breaths were short and deliciously ragged at his ear, and Matthew knew he was just as close. He felt weak, so wonderfully weak under Gilbert's touch, and the fact that Gilbert was so clearly getting off to *him* getting off was more than enough to bring him even closer to the edge.

“Matthew,” Gilbert panted, let out a throaty groan when Matthew's hips rolled into him again. "Matthew," he said again, "*Mein alles.*”

Matthew wanted to respond, say Gilbert's name, say how much he loved him, but he could no longer form words. *Everything*. Gilbert said he was everything. *His* everything. And that was it, he was gone. The sounds Matthew made as he came, the way he clutched at Gilbert's leg, shuddered against him—it was Gilbert's own end.

It felt like forever before Gilbert regained the ability to move, his body heavy, marvelously sluggish. How he'd managed to move both himself and Matthew still remained a mystery to him, but now here they lie face-to-face, a pillow at both their heads.

They didn't talk for some time, instead enjoying the sounds of each other's breathing slowly evening out.

"Gil?" Matthew spoke first, just above a whisper. "Are you—" There was no need for him to finish when he felt Gilbert move, drape an arm over his waist.

"Yeah," he said, pecking at Matthew's shoulder. "Still here. Barely." He sounded tired as he laughed, but in a good way.

Matthew smiled and reached out for his head, heard him sigh as he ran fingers through his hair. "Sleep."

Gilbert shook his head. "Need another shower," he mumbled. "Boxers'r gross."

Matthew laughed. "Yeah, I'm pretty gross too." He blushed suddenly, now aware of the mess he'd made drying at his stomach. “Crap, I'm sorry I didn't tell you before I…"

He chuckled. "Don't worry about it," he said, lips forming a little frown as Matthew began to sit up, the warmth of his body disappearing.

"Could you," he said, sitting up, much slower than he would've liked with his limbs still feeling so heavy, "open the nightstand? There's a box of tissues in there." Gilbert obliged, propped himself up on an elbow to pull open the drawer and bring out the box. "Maybe...two or three should do the trick?"

Gilbert laughed to himself as he pulled out a few sheets and finally sat up, ignoring Matthew's outstretched hand. "Just sit still and I'll get it."

"N-No, wait, I can—"

"Shh. Just...let me." Gilbert's voice was so spent. So full of exhaustion, of satisfaction, that Matthew couldn't even find it in himself to protest anymore. So he stayed put, cheeks warm as Gilbert slowly wiped him clean.

They were both silent as Gilbert worked, wiping a little longer at the spots that had been left to sit too long. Matthew's ears were turning pink again, still trying to understand why Gilbert was taking his time like this. *He* didn't even take more than a second or two to clean himself up, usually rushing against the flood of guilt that was sure to come shortly after he'd done the deed. But this...was nice. Slightly embarrassing though it was, it felt nice to be taken care of like this. In the silence his attention was taken by the sound of the window creaking under the gusting wind, and he wondered if it had been doing that this whole time. If it had, neither of them had noticed. He shivered suddenly.

"Cold?" Gilbert said, laughing a bit. "My bad, I'm almost done."

"Why are *you* apologizing to *me* right now?" Matthew said, incredulous. "You could at least tell me how gross this is," he said, sheepish, "to make this a little more normal."

"Nah," he said with a sleepy smile, patting Matthew dry. He then quickly cleaned between his own fingers, which of course hadn't been spared from their fun, and gathered the tissues into a neat wad. "Just lets me know I did a good job." He didn't remember when exactly the trash can had made it from behind the door to beside the bed, but he and his legs were grateful for it as he dropped the soiled tissues into the small bin. "C'mere, let's get warm," he said, pulling Matthew back down on to the bed.

Matthew gladly retreated beneath the blankets and between Gilbert's arms, whispering a "thank you." His face was still warm as he added, "It was more than just good. It was amazing."

"...Yeah?" Gilbert sounded sheepish, almost as if he didn't know what to do with Matthew's praise. If Matthew were the squealing type, he just might have done so. But he wasn't, far from it, so he used his lips instead. Gilbert smiled when Matthew moved in closer, their lips connecting in a soft kiss.

"So amazing," he said.

And Gilbert sighed softly as Matthew kissed him again. As much as Gilbert had wanted this, wanted to give Matthew this, he'd never actually done it before. At least, not to anyone but himself. So to hear that Matthew had enjoyed it so much was a huge relief.

"But you, I didn't get to..."

Gilbert shook his head, another soft laugh escaping him. The air that came from his nose tickled Matthew's skin. "You kidding? I can't remember the last time I came so hard," he said. "I'm good, trust me."

"That's not what I meant." Matthew scooted himself down a little, just enough to find Gilbert's nose with his own. "I wanted to take care of you too. Till the end."

"Oh..." Gilbert's cheeks grew warm as Matthew nuzzled his nose, buried a hand into his hair, fingers running up from the nape of his neck to his crown.

"Mm-hm."

Gilbert hummed into his mouth as he was kissed a third time. It lasted longer than the first two, was broken with a wet noise that made Gilbert's face deepen in color.

"Let me start with you first next time, okay?"

And Gilbert, mouth still slightly ajar, replied, "Yeah...okay."

The words came out in a little grunt of pleasure, courtesy of the tingle left by Matthew's soft lips, and the gentle fingers at his scalp. He fought against the heaviness of his eyelids, taking in the smile on Matthew's lips and the faint color against his cheeks. His eyes looked sleepy, contentedly so, and Gilbert couldn't think of anything other than how fucking lucky he was to see Matthew like this, so relaxed, so beautiful in his afterglow.

No matter how much Matthew tried to resist playing in Gilbert's hair he never lasted very long, addicted to the way the silky strands glided through his fingers, to the little sighs that always told him that Gilbert had no intention of stopping him. He loved the sound of Gilbert's breathing, how soft it was on his ears now, how slow and even it had become. The sound of Gilbert's fatigue, his contentment, his comfort—it made Matthew feel amazing, knowing that he was the cause of it. He dragged his fingertips slowly back down to settle at Gilbert's nape, the hair there damp with sweat. He could still feel a sheen of sweat cooling at his own back, and was thankful for Gilbert's warmth in the otherwise chilly room.

"Fuck," Gilbert said suddenly, a soft whine, and Matthew found it so adorable, how sleepy he sounded. "This shower's gonna be so cold." The grimace on his face softened at the sound of Matthew laughing next to him.

"Yeah," he said through a smile, hand still raking through his hair. "Probably even colder now that it's later." Gilbert groaned. "But that just means we'll be that much warmer when we get back in bed. We'll be clean and warm," he said, snuggling up to Gilbert's side, "and go out like lights."

"Damn," Gilbert chuckled, running a hand along Matthew's back. "You know how to sell a cold shower." He was answered with more breathy laughter.

They fell into another silence, Matthew's eyelids drooping as Gilbert continued to drag his hand up and down his back. Matthew didn't want to fall asleep, so he focused on the sound of the wind howling outside.

"Matt," Gilbert said softly. "I'm really happy you told me what you wanted."

He gave a weak little laugh. "Sorry it took a while."

"I don't care about spending a few minutes to get you more comfortable. I prefer it that way. I know we're still really new at this, so it'll take some time, but if we're going to do more than kissing from here on out, then I want you to be able to say exactly what it is you want from me. And what you don't. Freely."

Matthew smiled into the hand that had left his back for his cheek. "You're right," he said. "I'll work on it. Being less vague."

"Well, this was a good first practice, holy fuck. I nearly came just from the way you said 'handjobs.'"

"Gil!" he laughed.

"I'm being completely serious. I'll be playing that in my head for the next week, Jesus Christ."

"That much of a turn on, huh?"

"Yes. Hard yes."

"Noted," he said through another laugh.

"And the French, that's also a really hard fucking yes."

Matthew's face only got hotter as he remembered what he'd said. Nothing too extreme, certainly nothing as filthy as the things he'd thought to say. Except for...well, maybe Gilbert hadn't actually heard it. And if he had, maybe he'd forgotten what it meant.

"I never knew 'fuck' could sound so pretty and so damn hot at the same time," he laughed.

Matthew hid his face at Gilbert's shoulder. Of course Gilbert hadn't forgotten it.

It was one of the first things Gilbert had asked him about once he found out Matthew spoke French, all the curse words. And Matthew had mumbled them out reluctantly in the library, shushing Gilbert as he laughed much too loudly. Just thinking about it now made Matthew smile despite himself, because that had been so long ago. And yet here they were still. So much closer than Matthew could have ever imagined they'd be.

Matthew made a sheepish noise, shrugging further into him.

"I mean, it was pretty in English too," he thought aloud, chin resting at Matthew's head. "I guess it's just your voice that makes curses sound like cotton candy."

"Gil," Matthew whined. He hadn't even realized he'd said it a second time. No, he wasn't an innocent little kid, but those kind of words...really weren't his thing in normal circumstances. "That's so embarrassing."

"I liked it," said Gilbert, stroking at his head, and Matthew pulled away a bit. "Hearing you let loose like that was...I liked it a lot. It's nothing to be embarrassed about."

"I know," Matthew laughed softly. "I guess I just surprised myself."

Gilbert smirked, moved a few strands of hair from Matthew's flushed face. "I know that's not the first time you've let something dirty slip out."

"Well, no, but...it is with someone else listening."

"Well then, I hope it won't be the last," Gilbert chuckled. "I like hearing you say things you'd never say in front of your folks."

Matthew laughed again. "So what you're saying is, no soap for this dirty mouth?"

"Not a drop."

Matthew hummed, smirked a bit. "I'll see what I can do with that."

"Tease." Matthew squirmed when Gilbert gave his hip a little squeeze, slapped at his hand because it tickled, then draped his own arm over Gilbert.

"I like it when I can feel your breath on my skin," he said after a slight pause. Gilbert hummed softly, as if telling him to go on. "And when you hold me tightly." Gilbert hummed again, stroked at Matthew's adorably messy hair. "And you talk about my French, but I think the same about your German," he snickered.

Matthew already loved the sound of Gilbert's voice, but the way Gilbert's words fell from his tongue when he used his own language in the heat of passion, guttural, deep from the back of his throat, left him feeling faint.

"I can work with all of that." Matthew laughed again, and Gilbert grinned lazily, happily. “You really are everything to me,” he said. “I don't care how cheesy it sounds. That's what you are.”

Matthew reached out for Gilbert's face, cupped his cheek. "Well then I guess it's lucky for you I like cheese," he said through a little smirk.

Gilbert snorted. "Who's the dork now?"

Matthew laughed as Gilbert pulled him closer, squeezed him. And Matthew's lips continued to wobble even after he'd stopped laughing, like he had something more to say.

"What?" Gilbert's lips curled into a smirk. "Don't hold back on me now."

Matthew laughed again, curled his fingers into Gilbert's hair, slowly parted his lips. “*Je t'aime plus qu'hier et moins que demain*," he whispered. "I love you more than yesterday and less than I will tomorrow.” Gilbert was just as pink as Matthew as he flashed him a little smile. “How's that for cheesy?” His smile widened when he felt Gilbert laugh against his lips.

"I give it a solid eight out of ten."

He grinned. “I stand by it, though."

“I love you too, Matt,” he whispered, bringing his forehead to Matthew's.

There was a short silence before Matthew spoke again. "I...wanted to tell you something else earlier, but I couldn't get it out."

"Yeah?" he said softly, hand moving soothingly along Matthew's lower back. "What did you wanna say?"

"You didn't trick me into anything," he said, fingertips brushing along the length of Gilbert's collarbone. "I didn't accept your invite because I was interested in joining a club. I was interested in *you.*" Matthew laughed sheepishly at the way he'd phrased it. "Well, not like that, at least not yet. But I knew that I liked talking with you, and that I wanted to do it again. *You* reeled me in, not your super secret club."

Matthew smiled, bringing his arms around Gilbert's neck.

"You were funny and nice and...you actually listened when I spoke. I'm here because you're still all of those things to me. You're always making me laugh, and doing sweet things, and I never feel like I can't talk to you. And, last I checked, you didn't 'trick' me into liking those things about you. I did that all on my own, thank you very much."

Gilbert felt his face grow warm again, not able to decide which he liked more, Matthew's face as he teased him, or his fingers ghosting at the nape of his neck as he showered him with praise. He smiled into the kiss Matthew pressed to his lips.

"You make me so happy,” he sighed.

"Yeah?" Gilbert smirked and leaned forward, their noses brushing. “Keep going. I could listen to this all day."

"Okay," Matthew said, pushing his face away. "I think I've done enough for your big head today." But Gilbert leaned back in, squeezed him until he was rewarded with a giggle.

"*Nein, Vögelchen*," he said. "You can't fly away from me that easy."

And when Matthew laughed again, this time against his lips, Gilbert swore he could feel it go straight to his heart.

Dad

Chapter Summary

Gilbert's knee jerk reaction was to push away the empathy rising within him, push it away and replace it with indifference, maybe even disdain, but he stopped himself. Because today was where he left that Gilbert, that selfish, bitter version of himself, behind.

Chapter Notes

This is a pretty heavy chapter involving some mentions of emotional abuse, neglect, and depression; just a warning if you aren't in the kind of headspace to read this kind of subject matter at this time.

.⁘ ⁘

The Beilschmidt’s kitchen floor was covered in shattered glass, and Ludwig was the cause of it. He looked from the shards of the broken cup at his feet to his brother, who stood a few feet away, eyes wide. With the kitchen sink just an arm's length away from him, there was no reason why that cup shouldn't have made it inside. And yet there Ludwig was, surrounded by a sea of glass.

Gilbert gave him a small, apologetic smile. "Yeah," he said, rubbing at the back of his neck. "I know you weren't expecting that."

"I..." Ludwig started, again looking down at the floor, back up to his brother, and to the floor again, realizing what he'd just done and embarrassed that he'd reacted in such a way.

Gilbert watched the emotions that flickered across Ludwig's face as he trailed off, frozen in place. His face was contorted with concern at the mess he'd just created, and shock at what he'd just heard leave Gilbert's mouth. Great going, Gilbert, he thought to himself, you just broke your brother.

"No,” Ludwig finally finished, snapping himself out of his shock. “I wasn't," he said, quickly kneeling at the floor to gather the shards large enough not to cut him.

Gilbert waved his actions away with a hand. It was nothing more to Gilbert than one less dish to scrub. “We'll clean it later. Just...sit with me a minute."

Ludwig complied, joining his brother at the island. He cleared his throat, doing his best to ignore the crunch of glass under his feet as he sat down. “You...really want to know?" he asked, and the expression on Ludwig's face, a mixture of awe and disbelief, made him look like a small child in Gilbert's eyes. His baby brother. When was the last time he'd seen Ludwig look so unsure?

As Ludwig looked at him, eyes full of cautious hope, Gilbert nodded. "Yeah," he said. "I do."

And when Ludwig opened his mouth to respond, nothing but silence came out.

From the moment Gilbert had returned home from Matthew's place Valentine's Day weekend, Ludwig couldn't help but notice that Gilbert's demeanor had changed considerably since the last he'd seen him. But that was to be expected; he'd just spent an entire weekend with his boyfriend after all. And yet, expected as it was, Ludwig was still surprised at just *how* much his mood had improved.

He remembered how anxious Gilbert had been to leave, remembered watching his pale fingers grip the kitchen counter as the room grew silent, Ludwig not having an answer to supply to his question. Because, truthfully, he hadn't known what to say.

Ludwig wasn't sure what would've happened if Feliciano hadn't rang the doorbell in that moment. Perhaps Ludwig would have broken the uncomfortable silence, answered with something reassuring, something that would heighten both their spirits. Or maybe Gilbert would've beat him to it, changing the subject as he tended to do. But Feliciano had indeed come right then and there, and so all Ludwig could do was look at his brother and hope that he understood that he wasn't alone in his grief.

“Well, *someone's* excited to see his valentine,” Feliciano had giggled against him, both hearing the sound of Gilbert's car roaring to life mere seconds after the front door had closed.

Yes, Gilbert was certainly excited to see Matthew, Ludwig was sure of that. But Ludwig knew that it wasn't the only reason for Gilbert's haste. He knew that Gilbert had long been ready to go, to leave behind the long, heavy silences, and the constant reminders that their family wasn't what it used to be. If only for a weekend. So Ludwig had seen him off with a smile, looked down into a warm sea of amber, and hoped that Gilbert would find the same healing in Matthew's arms as he did in Feliciano's.

And it was clear now more than ever that Gilbert had found just that. In the words that he'd so suddenly spoken, in the unflinching way that he was looking at Ludwig now, and in the clarity with which he'd said that, yes, he *had* meant what he'd said, Ludwig knew. He knew that Matthew had been responsible. Knew that Matthew was what Gilbert had needed. But up until Ludwig's cup had hit the floor, Ludwig hadn't been able to figure out why Gilbert appeared to be so much...lighter.

Yes, that was the only word Ludwig could think of to describe Gilbert when he came through the front door that Sunday morning, humming to himself as he left his boots at the door, dancing into the living room to a song that Ludwig apparently couldn't hear. It was so unlike the way he'd left three days ago, because while he hadn't stormed out, Ludwig could tell that Gilbert wasn't his usual self, sensed a sort of desperation in how quickly his car had backed

out of the driveway. But when Gilbert came into the living room that afternoon, there was no trace of the Gilbert he'd seen then.

He'd plopped down on the arm of the couch where Ludwig sat with a book, asking how he and Feliciano had enjoyed their weekend, and saying that he hoped they'd taken advantage of all the house's "free space."

Ludwig simply cleared his throat. "It was nice," he said as color rose to his cheeks, only slightly annoyed at Gilbert's teasing. The fact that Gilbert was even in a mood to tease him was, in a way, comforting. "Though we lost power for a bit."

Ludwig looked up from his book in time to see Gilbert break into a little smile. "Yeah, so did we. But all weekend. It only came back this morning."

"And what about you?" Ludwig asked. "You look like you had a good time."

Gilbert gave a soft little laugh as he shrugged out of his coat and tossed it over the back of the couch, his scarf following suit. It wasn't an actual answer, and it was that fact that made Ludwig look up again, curious. Ludwig had expected to see a smirk of some sort, maybe the beginnings of one of his brother's trademark grins, but no, the small smile remained, his brother looking almost sheepish. "On the way over here," Gilbert finally said, "I kept thinking about how I really owe you an apology."

Ludwig froze his seat, not having expected such a response. And it would be just one of the many times that day that Gilbert surprised him. He watched Gilbert cross the room to warm himself at the fireplace, holding out his hands and rubbing his palms together. "An apology?" Ludwig said to Gilbert's back, "What for?"

"For all the shit I've given you about Feliciano," said Gilbert. "'Cause, really, I'm no better."

At that answer, Ludwig relaxed in his seat then, a small smile of his own coming to his lips.

Gilbert had always poked his fair share of lighthearted fun at Ludwig's relationship with Feliciano, mostly because he'd seen it coming a mile away. He'd seen the way they'd begun to look at each other, how their gazes had started to linger as they watched each other change over the course of one summer. He'd seen it as they listened to each other's voices crack and morph into something less clumsy, something unexpectedly pleasant. He'd seen it as they'd watched one another's bodies grow and mature into those of young men who were quickly leaving boyhood behind. Gilbert had noticed it right away, so when it finally happened, when *they* finally happened, Gilbert couldn't have been anymore pleased (especially with himself, because after all, he'd been awesome enough to predict it).

And as such, he never passed up an opportunity to tease Ludwig for how hopelessly enamored he was for his best friend turned boyfriend. No, Gilbert never passed up a chance to peek his head inside the bathroom door as Ludwig messed with his hair in the mirror for much longer than anticipated. Nor did he spare a knowing glance on those weekends when he found the couple together in the kitchen, watching Feliciano feed Ludwig a bit of pasta sauce from a simmering pot, or Ludwig wipe at Feliciano's flour covered cheeks as he scolded him

for eating too much cookie dough. It had never ceased to amaze him just how happy they were to simply be in each other's company.

Gilbert had never said it aloud, perhaps because Ludwig had been too young to share Gilbert's memories of that time, but sometimes, when he watched Feliciano curl up next to Ludwig in front of the TV, or Ludwig pull a blanket over Feliciano's dozing figure, he was reminded of their parents, and how they used to do that.

It reminded him of how he used to squeeze himself between his mother and father on the living room couch on Saturday mornings, his father telling him to be careful as he wriggled to get a better look at his new baby brother, swaddled in his mother's arms. By the time Ludwig was old enough to walk and talk, that couch had become a sad, empty place. A place where their father often slept after nights of heated arguments.

It was why seeing them together, seeing that his little brother had found something so opposite from what he *thought* love was as a child of a failing marriage, made Gilbert genuinely happy. Because Ludwig deserved every bit of that true love that he'd come to experience, and Gilbert could never resist reminding him of every bit he happened to see.

“You and I both know that's not necessary,” Ludwig said, slowly closing his book. Again he stared at Gilbert's back. “So...you're finally giving up on the ridiculous notion that I'm somehow more ‘captured’ than you. Is that right?”

Gilbert didn’t respond right away, hands dropping to his sides. When he spoke, Ludwig had to strain to hear. “I just...didn't think it could happen to me. At least, not this soon. I mean, one of us had to inherit the shitty love life gene, right? But instead, I got Matthew. By some goddamn miracle.” He laughed softly, turned to face his brother. But Ludwig wasn't smiling anymore.

“Why are you speaking as if Matthew is someone you don't deserve?”

Gilbert turned back to the fire, slipping a hand into his back pocket and and grabbing the poker from the hearth with the other. “Because sometimes...it feels that way. Hell, sometimes…” he said, pausing as he began to prod at the flames, “*a lot* of the time, it feels like I don't even deserve *you*, Lutz.”

Ludwig frowned when Gilbert laughed again, a soft breathy sound. “Gilbert...that's nonsense.”

Ludwig had never before been so confused and concerned at the same time. This was the second time that day that Gilbert left him searching for answers. The things Gilbert was saying, how sober his tone had become, it was all a huge contrast to how he'd come bouncing through the door, and Ludwig found himself wishing that Gilbert would make some obscene joke, maybe poke and prod for the intimate details about Ludwig's weekend, just so that he'd know that everything was okay.

It wasn't until he'd asked about Gilbert's time with Matthew that Gilbert had changed the way he did, voice quieter, smiles more reserved, and this realization made Ludwig's body stiffen

once more. “Gilbert,” he began carefully, “you never answered my question. How was your time with Matthew? Is...everything alright between you two?”

Gilbert slowly placed the poker back in it's proper place, feeling his face go warm and his heart begin to race and his lips stretching into a smile that he could no longer contain. “He...he said he loves me, Lutz. I think that's more than alright, don't you?”

Ludwig smiled back at his brother, at his flushed face and his familiar grin, a bit lopsided in his excitement.

“He said that,” Gilbert said, again plopping himself on the arm of the couch next to Ludwig. “To *me*.”

“I'm happy for you. Really. And make no mistake, you *do* deserve this. Him.” Gilbert looked to him as Ludwig placed a hand on his shoulder. “And me. Don't ever doubt that.”

“Yeah,” he replied, smile softening as he gave a firm nod. “Thanks, Lutz.”

“I should actually be the one thanking *you*.”

Gilbert laughed at that. “For what? Talking your ear off about Matt?”

“Well, because...you're the reason Feli and I are dating in the first place. I’m sure you haven't forgotten that.” Gilbert watched as Ludwig's face flushed a light pink. “It was such a confusing time for me, and...well, who knows where Feli and I would be now if you hadn't been there for me to confide in.”

Gilbert tutted, waving a hand in denial. “I know I’m your awesome big brother and all, but you're giving me too much credit. You two were crazy about each other from the beginning. It was gonna happen one way or another. That picture you've got in your wallet's proof enough, don't you think?”

He and Feliciano, both six years old, curled up and dozing against each other, using a heap of three large dogs as makeshift pillows. It was an old Polaroid, taken by their father, now worn and dingy with age. Ludwig had found it early last year in some old boxes in their basement, and it had been in his wallet ever since. Just thinking about the image had his chest buzzing with warmth.

“But,” Gilbert finished with a smile, “I'm glad you felt you could come to me.” He gave a wistful sigh. “That was back when I still had a couple inches on you. Before you had to outdo me and grow into the Hulk.” Ludwig chuckled as Gilbert gave his arm a little nudge. “Yeah...you were still so cute back then.”

“Gilbert…” Ludwig mumbled, rubbing at his neck. Though when Ludwig thought about it, that was three whole years ago, so he could forgive Gilbert’s embarrassing reminiscence. Because after all, he really had changed a lot since then.

His seventh grade year had not been all that different from other thirteen year olds, often plagued by the anxieties that came with experiencing one's body change and act in ways it

never had before. Ludwig had thought he was well prepared; their father had given them “the talk” just before they started junior high (quite mechanically, and with an admittedly outdated booklet aptly entitled *Your Body and You*), so Ludwig had anticipated the sudden, sometimes unexplained erections, the embarrassment of waking up to messy boxers, and the “urges” that might arise within him when he happened to see a pretty girl in class.

Except, that was exactly where it went wrong. Because when he began to feel those urges, pretty girls were not the cause. Feliciano was.

Ludwig remembered the day it happened. The summer Feliciano had kissed both his cheeks goodbye as he often did, and he found himself, for the first time, wishing that each peck hadn't faded so quickly. And then came another thought, a moment of him wondering what his friend's lips would feel like against his own. The thoughts had terrified him, because the book Vati had read from had said nothing about boys experiencing attraction for other boys.

A few weeks of self-contained panic soon stretched into an entire month, and by then Ludwig knew that the longer he kept this secret, the worse he would feel. In the time that Ludwig had begun to wrestle with himself, Feliciano’s bright, warm smiles had come to be replaced with little frowns of worry, and it was all Ludwig's fault.

Whenever Feliciano asked why he never wanted to take siestas together anymore, or why Ludwig's hugs weren't as strong, or why Ludwig had become so quiet on their bus rides home, Ludwig was always ready with some pathetic excuse. He just wasn't all that tired lately, he was just in a bit of a hurry, he was just thinking about an upcoming test.

Ludwig was the only one who knew that it was really because Feliciano tended to cuddle when he slept, and that Ludwig often woke to find himself cuddling back. Whenever he brought his arms around Feliciano, he often felt as if he never wanted to let go, so he thought it best that the action be short and sweet, lest he torture himself any more than he had to. And when he fell into a silence on the way home from school, it was because he was wondering what the hell was wrong with him, what Feliciano would think of him if he knew what kind of person he was friends with. These were the real reasons, and Ludwig couldn't bare to see what his constant lies were doing to his best friend.

It was one afternoon after school when Ludwig left Feliciano at his doorstep that he realized just how much he'd pushed him away. Feliciano had smiled back at him as he opened his front door, a small, sad smile, as he said a quiet, “Good night, Ludwig.”

Ludwig's own name had crashed into him, and it felt as if he'd been side swept at an intersection, left frozen as Feliciano disappeared behind the door, closing it with a soft click. *Ludwig*? Feliciano never called him by his full name. It was almost always “Luddy,” sometimes “Lud,” but never *Ludwig*. It was the first time that Ludwig had ever felt that his own name didn't belong to him. At least, not coming from Feliciano.

And as if that hadn't scared Ludwig enough, the days that followed were even more unsettling. Feliciano became quiet, no more chattering and giggling at Ludwig's side as they walked through the halls. No pulls at Ludwig's arm, no tugs at his hands. And at the end of each day that followed, no kisses or hugs goodbye. There was no bitterness from Feliciano,

no anger or frustration. Just sadness. And that Ludwig was the sole cause of it was more than he could take.

“Feliciano,” he'd said, watching him push open his front door for the fifth time that week.

And he'd watched as his friend turned around, that same weak smile on his face as he answered with a, “Yes?”

He opened his mouth to speak, but the words wouldn't come out. Ludwig couldn't get them to come out. Because all he could see was the hurt Feliciano wore on his sleeve and suddenly he felt like nothing he said would be enough to make the pain go away. And so before he knew it, he was reaching out, bringing his arms around Feliciano and pulling him into a tight hug.

He'd heard Feliciano gasp, and he felt himself smile because Feliciano always did that when he hugged him this way, always followed by a little giggle that Ludwig was forever fond of. That was why when sounds of crying followed instead, Ludwig felt as if his heart had stopped. He quickly released his grip and began to pull away, but Feliciano pulled him back, wrapping his arms around him.

“I thought,” Feliciano said, voice muffled at Ludwig's shoulder, sucking in shaky breaths. “I thought you were going to say you didn't want to be friends anymore…”

“What? Feli, no,” he said, hugging the boy even tighter, “of course I still want to be friends. I —” He faltered when Feliciano continued to whimper against him. “I'm sorry. I'm really sorry. I've just been so stressed lately and I–*Es tut mir sehr leid*.”

“S-So...you're not mad at me?” Feliciano asked softly against his shoulder.

“God, no.” Ludwig shook his head, gripped the bookbag at Feliciano's back. “I'm sorry that I've been so distant. I've just...had a lot to think about lately. But that's no excuse. The way I've been acting...it's not fair to you and I—”

“It's okay, Luddy,” Feliciano said as he slowly pulled back, and the sound of his nickname leaving Feliciano's lips had Ludwig overwhelmed with relief.

“I'm sorry,” he said again, watching the other wipe at his eyes. And suddenly his hand was reaching out, wiping at Feliciano's cheek.

“These are because I'm happy, you know,” he said, placing his hand over Ludwig's. “I'm just so happy we're still friends. Because…we have been since we were babies, you know? I didn't want that to end because of me.”

“Feli…” It's not you, Ludwig thought, you were *never* to blame.

“Whatever you're stressed about, you can tell me about it. I'll listen. If you want to tell me. If you don't, that's okay too. I just...want to help you somehow. Because that's what friends do, right?”

Ludwig swallowed and gave a slow nod, suddenly hit by the strong urge to bring Feliciano's lips to his own. His face was hot and his heart was beating much too fast. How would

Feliciano react if he knew that *he* was the reason for Ludwig's current state? How would he react if he knew that Ludwig wanted to be *more* than friends? He licked his lips, swallowed again.

“Would you still want to...come over tomorrow?”

“To do homework? Sure! If you, um, still want the company.”

“I do,” said Ludwig, embarrassingly fast. Doing their homework together was just so...familiar. And Ludwig wanted that familiarity back. Just having Feliciano stretched out on his bedroom floor, solving math problems as he chewed on his eraser, beaming up at Ludwig every now and again, would be more than enough. “I... would like that.”

“Okay,” he said, smiling brightly, a sight Ludwig hadn't seen all week. “I'll see you tomorrow then.”

“Alright.”

This was where Ludwig expected Feliciano to head inside, throw a smile over his shoulder as he closed the door behind him. But strangely, Feliciano had yet to move. Ludwig watched as Feliciano pressed his lips together, cheeks turning pink.

“What's wrong?”

“Oh, nothing. I just...wanted to say goodbye. Um…” Ludwig froze when Feliciano nibbled at his bottom lip, the meaning of his words hitting him, right at that very moment. “See you tomorrow,” he said, grabbing for the door handle. But before he could leave the doorstep, Ludwig pulled him back.

Ludwig saw the surprise in Feliciano's eyes as he turned around, as he looked down at the hand that had taken his, and then up at Ludwig. Ludwig stared back at him, only just now realizing that Feliciano was no longer just looking at him, but *up* at him. When had that happened?

“Lu…?”

It snapped Ludwig out of his thoughts, and again he looked at Feliciano, *down* at Feliciano, and felt his heart speed up once more. That was when he leaned in and kissed Feliciano, a peck on each cheek.

When he pulled away, he saw that his friend's cheeks had deepened in color, face still wearing an expression of shock.

“I'll, uh,” he said, gently releasing Feliciano's hand, “see you tomorrow.”

And Feliciano broke into a grin that stayed etched into Ludwig's memory for the rest of the evening. “Okay.”

The moment Ludwig made it home, he knocked on Gilbert's bedroom door and told him everything. He told his brother about his feelings for Feliciano, who was most certainly not a

girl, and how much these thoughts troubled him. Boys weren't supposed to like boys, so there must've been something wrong with him. Even more so because this boy he liked just so happened to be his closest friend, so clearly there *had* to be something wrong with him, because why else would he be so stupid as to ruin such a strong friendship with his own disgusting feelings.

Ludwig wasn't clueless, he'd often heard his fellow students call each other “gay” in the confines of the gym locker room. He'd heard that word used to describe the kids who walked around with inhalers and played with trading cards in a secluded corner of the cafeteria. He *knew* what it meant, knew that being a boy accused of liking other boys was the ultimate insult. And if that was the case, he didn't *want* to like boys. But...he couldn't deny that he felt certain things when he was with Feliciano.

Ludwig vividly remembered that day, when his big brother threw an arm over his shoulder and told him that there was absolutely nothing wrong with him and that it was perfectly okay for boys to like boys. Gilbert told him that the guys Ludwig often overheard at school were “insecure little shits” who had nothing better to do but make everyone else as miserable as they were. But what he remembered most that day, was feeling a mixture of shock and disbelief when Gilbert proudly proclaimed that he too liked boys.

“But...I thought you liked girls. Like Elizabeta,” he'd said, referring to the pretty Hungarian exchange student his brother had pined for all through sixth and seventh grade.

“I like both,” Gilbert said with a grin and a shrug.

“Both? You can like both boys and girls? And it's okay?”

Yes, Ludwig would be forever grateful to Gilbert for how patient and supportive he had been that day as Ludwig attempted to make sense of himself, teaching him things that weren't in their father's little booklet, and answering questions that Ludwig had never thought he'd let leave his mind.

Gilbert was the reason why on the following day, when Feliciano suggested they take a “homework siesta,” something they hadn't done in a long while, Ludwig obliged.

When Ludwig had awoken from his nap, Feliciano was staring right at him, face slightly flushed. Ludwig's arms had made their way around Feliciano in his sleep, and the realization had his face changing color too. And the moment he apologized and began to pull away, is when Feliciano pulled him back. And they'd stared at each other, red-faced, inching closer and closer. Ludwig would never forget it. The day their lips first met. The day he kissed Feliciano. And Feliciano kissed him back.

Ludwig wouldn't deny the fact that the fondness he had for Feliciano had been with him for a long, long, time. But his confidence in those feelings, and in his own identity, most assuredly hadn't been. It was Gilbert who had given him that confidence, whether he took credit for it or not.

Just as Gilbert began to coo and muss up his hair in a way he knew annoyed Ludwig to no end, a high pitched beeping noise sounded from the kitchen stove. Ludwig took the

opportunity to scoot over a few inches while Gilbert was distracted by the sound, frowning as he restored his hair back to decency.

“You already started on dinner?” Gilbert asked as he turned back around. “Without me?”

Ludwig gave a small chuckle at the pout on Gilbert's face. “I just pre-heated the oven for the potatoes,” Ludwig said as he got to his feet. “I could use some help with the vegetables. If you're up for it.”

Gilbert grinned as he joined his brother in heading for the kitchen. “Please,” he scoffed. And Ludwig broke into a little smile himself. Because both of them knew that Gilbert could roast the *hell* out of some veggies.

The two spent the next hour in the kitchen, the house steadily swimming in the savory scents of butter, garlic and various spices. As was customary, between conversation Ludwig would scold Gilbert for not watching his fingers as he chopped and diced (often followed by a facetious “Yes, Mutti”), and Gilbert would make a game of how many things he could nibble and munch at before the pan was taken from his hands and put into the oven. Gilbert planted himself on one of the countertops while Ludwig took a chair at the island (the more sensible option in his opinion), both chatting about nothing in particular as they waited for the food to be done.

And when it came time to eat, they ate well, neither truly realizing how hungry they'd been until they sat down at the table. It was a silent meal, comfortably so, and when Gilbert finally spoke it was only to groan at how full he was. Ludwig shared his sentiments, sighing as he leaned back in his seat. He then shook his head suddenly, as if scolding himself.

“If I don't move now,” said Ludwig, “I'm not sure I'll be able to for a while.” Gilbert laughed as Ludwig stood and began stacking their plates and utensils. “I need to shower anyway. Unless you want to go first?”

Gilbert shook his head. “It’s all yours,” he replied, stacking their cups. Ludwig motioned for him to hand them over and he did. “Just leave them in the sink,” Gilbert said, getting to his feet before he too risked falling prey to the nefarious food coma. “I'll get them once I put away the leftovers,” he said, resealing the food with the same foil it'd been cooked in and making for the fridge. Ludwig nodded and headed for the sink at the opposite end of the room.

Gilbert found himself staring a bit too long at the pan after he'd placed it on one of the shelves, lost in thought. He shook his head and closed the fridge, looking over at his brother as he placed the dishes in the sink.

He glanced at Ludwig's back and then to the tile floor, suddenly feeling shame. They'd just shared a delicious meal together, and yet Gilbert couldn't help but be reminded of the times when dinner wasn't this pleasant. Due to no fault but his own.

He didn't know if he could ever truly make up for how long he'd left Ludwig to deal with the consequences of his own stubbornness and pride. And yet even with that uncertainty still lingering in his mind, his desire to make things right was stronger. From the moment he'd

pulled into the driveway, he'd known that today would be the day he started the conversation. It was just a matter of when.

And “when,” Gilbert realized, was now.

“Hey, Lud,” he said suddenly.

“Yes?”

“How's Dad?”

No, Ludwig hadn't expected those words to come from his brother, and certainly not as suddenly as they had. It was why his hands had been unsteady as he rushed to clean the mess he'd made, why his heart sped up as Gilbert told him that yes, his ears were working as they should. So this was real, he wasn't hallucinating.

“He's…” Ludwig slowly began, still reeling from the fact that for the first time in six months, he was going to say more about their father than the fact that he sent Gilbert his greetings.

Gilbert was a little unnerved by Ludwig's hesitation, although he didn't show it. Instead he put on a small little frown, his expression a bit miffed. “Don't tell me the old bastard's secretly dying too,” he said, an attempt to lighten the mood. “He still owes me a new Ninja Turtles shirt, so I'm not letting him cross over until I get it.”

Ludwig stared at Gilbert, watched the frown on his face morph into a smirk, and before he could catch himself, he let out a laugh. His lips trembled as Gilbert began to snicker, and just as soon as he thought he was done, he started laughing again, old memories of a much younger, much more unreasonable Gilbert resurfacing his mind.

Gilbert broke into a full grin as he joined in, trying to remember when was the last time he'd been able to make Ludwig lose control of his own laughter like this. Maybe it was last winter, when he'd slipped on the driveway and belly flopped onto the pavement, Aster's leash ripping from his hand. That damn dog, so adorable in her excitement and yet too eager to realize that going for a walk was a lot less simple when the ground was frozen over. Yeah, Ludwig had had himself a good laugh then.

“You still remember that?” asked Ludwig through a smile of his own.

The Ninja Turtles t-shirt, the source of much joy and, by the end of its lifespan, many tears. Yes, 7-year-old Gilbert had had a Teenage Mutant Ninja Turtles phase; it was the first American children's show he'd become obsessed with, and “cowabunga” soon became his favorite of all the new English words he'd picked up in his pursuit of Saturday morning entertainment. He never missed an episode if he could help it, even the reruns, and he'd gotten his fair share of toys on Christmases and birthdays to satisfy his newfound love for anthropomorphic turtles skilled in martial arts.

Ludwig was more into Thomas the Tank Engine, but of course he play fought as Donatello with Gilbert as Leonardo whenever the chance provided itself.

The infamous shirt, bright green with the whole crew printed on the front striking a pose and the words “Green is Gnarly,” was Gilbert's favorite of all his shirts, and he wore it to bed each night (excluding the nights where Mr. Beilschmidt demanded he put it in the hamper to be washed; unlike his father, little Gilbert had never cared about the odd food stain or two, or five). That is, until their father washed it a little too thoroughly, and it shrunk. Gilbert could just barely get his big head through the neck hole before realizing that the getting his arms through the sleeves was impossible, even with his father's help. Gilbert had cried and cried when his father apologized, told him there was no way he could return the shirt to its original size. Then he'd cried some more, begged Mr. Beilschmidt to let him get in the washing machine so he could shrink too. Gilbert insisted he wasn't afraid, whined that his Vati wasn't being fair, pouted that it was his fault anyway, so he should be fair and let him be shrunken! It didn't matter how many times he was told that it didn't work that way. He gave his father the silent treatment, arms crossed and all, for a whole fifteen minutes before he snuggled into his side with Ludwig on the living room couch for a movie.

“Yeah,” Gilbert said, rubbing at his neck. “I was a pretty dumb kid, huh? I don't even know how Dad put up with me then.”

Ludwig felt a sudden sensation run through his chest, an overwhelming sense of relief, of gratitude, as he heard Gilbert say the word “Dad” again. It was the second time now he'd said it like that, without contempt or malice, without a scowl or a scoff. In fact, the way he'd said it just now, the word floating gently on waves of nostalgia, had Ludwig's heart beating faster because now, he could see that the wall Gilbert had build around himself, between him and the things he didn't want to see, was coming down. And for once, it wasn't because Ludwig was chipping at its bricks. It was coming down, all on its own, because Gilbert wanted it to.

Gilbert's hark back to the tragic loss of his T-shirt, reminded Ludwig of the foolish innocence he too had once possessed.

“Well, I once thought it was appropriate to use an entire bottle of detergent for a single load of clothes,” Ludwig said, “so I think it's safe to say it comes with the territory of being so young.”

“Oh, God, I remember that,” Gilbert snickered. “The whole house smelled like soap for days.”

The day 6-year-old Ludwig had tried to be helpful one Sunday morning and “do laundry” while Gilbert and their father were busying themselves cleaning out the basement for a yard sale. He'd tossed in some clothes, hopped on a chair he'd dragged from the kitchen, and poured an entire jug of detergent down into the machine before shutting it closed and cranking the handle to something called “turbo.” Long story short, Gilbert and their father emerged from the basement some time later to find young Ludwig in the laundry room, bouncing around in a mountain of white suds. Through giggles, Ludwig had explained that he was doing laundry and then “snow” came from the washing machine. The exasperation on their father's face disappeared when Ludwig threw a “snowball” of foam at Gilbert's head, followed by Gilbert throwing one at their father. A father-son snowball fight in the middle of June.

“Probably more like weeks. I'm sure our noses got used to it after some time,” Ludwig chuckled.

“What was it? Apple Tang or something?”

“Apple Mango Tango. And Dad was so sick of the smell he never bought it again.”

Gilbert laughed and shook his head. “Yeah, I noticed.”

The two brothers sat wordlessly there for a moment, enjoying the feeling of warmth that came with each flash of the past.

“We had an okay childhood,” Gilbert said suddenly. “Despite everything.” He looked down at the black marble countertop beneath his arms, saw a blurred image of himself reflected back at him. His smile was gone. “Despite the way things are now.”

Ludwig's own smile slowly faded. “We did.” He watched Gilbert look up from the table, back over at him. His expression was sober.

“How is he?” he asked again.

“He’s fine,” Ludwig said. But the answer felt too short, too brief for an answer to a question Ludwig didn't think he'd ever hear from Gilbert, at least not any time this soon. So he added, “He seems less stressed than he once was. Now that Opa is stable.”

So he's been stressed, Gilbert thought. It made sense. His father was slowly dying before his eyes, and because their grandfather refused to let him hire a live-in nurse for the hours he was away at work, there must have always been a nagging fear at the back of his mind for those hours he was away from the old man. Ludwig had told him about the home-care argument between father and son last September; it was about Opa, so Ludwig had known Gilbert would want to hear about it, despite it involving their father, who he, of course, had no interest in hearing about.

It felt strange for Gilbert to think about his father in this way, to see him as anyone other than a man who'd broken promises, betrayed his trust. To see him as a man who was also hurting. It was strange and his knee jerk reaction was to push away the empathy rising within him, push it away and replace it with indifference, maybe even disdain, but he stopped himself. Because today was where he left that Gilbert, that selfish, bitter version of himself, behind. It was true. He wasn't the only one who was hurting.

“So no more talk about bringing in a nurse at all, then,” Gilbert said, tone steady and even.

Ludwig shook his head. “Dad gave up on that a while ago.”

“Heh. If Old Fritz is as stubborn with Death as he is with everything else then maybe he's got a lot longer than we think.”

Ludwig smiled, surprised and yet glad to hear Gilbert sounding so different from what he had three days ago, adding years to their grandfather's life rather than prematurely taking them away.

“Ever since Opa had his lung surgery, Dad's stopped taking work home and staying at the office late. He doesn't work weekends anymore either.”

Gilbert sat up a little from where he'd leaned against the table top. “You're joking right?” he said, skeptical.

Ludwig shook his head again. “I'm not.”

“So you're telling me that since last September he's been working like a normal human being?”

“I am.”

Gilbert sat there for a beat or two, trying to comprehend it. That *was* their father, always working long hours, bringing work home, working late into the night, working when he should have been spending time with his family.

He was a workaholic. It was the main reason, among other things, why their mother had an affair, why their marriage had ended in divorce when Gilbert was six and Ludwig five.

Gilbert may have been quite young when things began to fall apart, only four or five at the time, but he had vivid memories of his home life in Berlin, remembered when weekend picnics to the countryside and trips to the park became days where his father disappeared into his study all day, only coming out when it was dinner time (and even then their mother had to beg him to take a break). At six, Gilbert had first seen the man who'd made his mother feel like more than a housewife, had seen him kissing her through the open window of their minivan as he sat next to his baby brother in the backseat, the younger too distracted with his toy to see what he just had.

Even at so young an age Gilbert had known that what he'd seen was wrong. He knew that mommies and daddies kissed (even if his mommy and daddy didn't kiss that much anymore), but that man that had kissed Mutti was not Vati, and somehow, it made him feel uneasy. His mother had caught his gaze in the rearview mirror, and Gilbert had looked down and picked at one of the buttons on his overalls as she turned around.

“*Liebchen*,” she'd said, and Gilbert had looked up to see a gentle smile on her face.

Even now he remembered the pretty pink lipstick she wore, the way her golden hair sat at her shoulders, perfectly wavy from the curling iron she'd used that morning. The dress she wore blew freely with the breeze, was soft against Gilbert's fingertips as he held onto her. He could even remember the way she smelled that day, the way her strong perfume hit his nose as sat him down into his booster seat. And the shoes she wore, they made noise as she walked; Gilbert remembered Ludwig finding it hilarious, remembered him putting his own little feet in their mother's too-big shoes and giggling as he ran click-clacking down the hall, their mother chasing after him.

It was his mother and yet, in a way he hadn't seen her in a long time. He was used to her messy buns, her unruly hair spilling onto his face, brushing against his cheeks as she tickled him. He was used to her warm, fuzzy sweaters, her old T-shirts that she wore whenever she

was cleaning. He was used to the way she smelled when she put him down for a nap, to the fluffy bunny slippers she wore around the house.

The last time Gilbert had seen his mother like this, like the woman who was smiling at him from the driver's seat, she was with his father, both of them kissing he and Ludwig goodnight before leaving out the door, leaving them in the hands of his aunt to be watched over.

The last time, she was with their father. And this time, she was with a man who was not.

“Did you enjoy your nap?” she'd asked. And Gilbert had looked at her, confused, because he hadn't been napping at all. “You were snoring just like a big bear.” He watched his mother's eyes shift to his brother next to him. “Wasn't he, Ludchen?”

“Yeah, like a big, big bear,” Ludwig had giggled. And before Gilbert could say that, no, he hadn't been napping, his mother's eyes had shifted back to him, her smile perhaps even sweeter than it had been before.

“For being such good boys, I think my little ones and I should get some ice cream before going home. How does that sound?”

Ludwig had squealed with delight and Gilbert had given a celebratory shout of his own, his confusion, and the man, quickly forgotten.

Until he saw the man again.

Gilbert couldn't remember the man's face. Maybe because he'd buried it so deep in his memory. Because he didn't want to remember the face of the man who'd helped tear their family apart.

And the thing was, Gilbert *should* have remembered his face. He absolutely should have, as many times as he'd seen him, been with him. He was there when their mother took them to the park, helped push he and his brother on the swings. He was there when they went to the lake, calmed Ludwig when he cried because Gilbert had splashed water in his face. He was there when they went to the aquarium, stood next to Gilbert and ruffled his hair as he pressed his face to the glass to look at the jellyfish.

He was a part of the new family their mother had created, the new family their father didn't know existed.

It went on like this for a little over a month, this new man showing up to places they used to go with their father. This man had come to fill his father's place and yet Gilbert knew he wasn't supposed to be there. Didn't *want* him there. No, he wanted his father. *His* father. Not this strange man. Ludwig was easier to please, liked the sweets the man gave him, the cool magic tricks the man showed him. To Ludwig, he really was just “Mutti's friend.”

Gilbert knew better. And yet...

His mother always made it clear that this man, this “friend” of hers, was never to be spoken of. Because if Vati knew, he would take he and his brother away from her, and they would

never see her again.

“You don't want to hurt Mutti like that, do you?” she'd asked him, wearing one of her too sweet smiles, the ones that had come to make Gilbert's skin run cold. His mother never passed up an opportunity to remind him of this.

It got even worse when Gilbert became open with his dislike of her new lover, refusing the snacks he bought for he and his brother, wriggling out of the man's grip whenever he tried to pick him up, returning his chatter with bored stares. He was always punished when they returned home, given no dessert while Ludwig got twice as much, his favorite toys disappearing from his play chest while Ludwig got shiny new ones.

And his father never knew until well after the divorce because while he was there, he was rarely ever actually *there*. Gilbert knew now that his mother had been trying to drive a wedge between he and his brother, but it hadn't worked because Gilbert had always felt protective of him, especially in knowing that he was still so oblivious to what was going on.

One night, Ludwig had slipped up at dinner. Had said the man's name, told their father that he was really good at whistling. And Gilbert had seen the way his mother had scowled, gone just as quickly as he'd seen it and replaced with unnatural, high pitched laughter.

“Oh, dear, you don't know about Ludchen's imaginary friend, do you? He's quite the character, isn't he, Gilbert?”

Looking back, Gilbert didn't even know how he'd known to nod as fast as he did, how he'd known how to describe the imaginary friend in such great detail, how he'd known exactly how to lie to his father.

That same night, Ludwig had asked their mother to read his favorite bed time story. She'd refused, her face stone cold as she closed their bedroom door. Ludwig's first punishment. Gilbert had seen the tears in Ludwig's eyes, his lips trembling as Gilbert hushed him and pulled him into his own bed. And that had been the final straw.

Later that night, their father had found out the truth straight from Gilbert's lips. Gilbert had gone downstairs for a glass of water, and his father was on the couch lying under a thin blanket with a pillow at his head, a common sight by then. He'd been rubbing at his face when he looked up at Gilbert coming down the last step. His father's deep blue eyes had looked tired as Gilbert walked up to him, dark circles underneath, stubble growing along his chin and cheeks. When he'd asked why Gilbert was awake so late at night, Gilbert had told him, and climbed onto the couch as his father told him he'd go get him a glass.

“When you finish, it's straight back to bed, okay?” his father had said, handing him his favorite mug. Gilbert nodded.

It was the first time Gilbert had ever drank water that still left his mouth dry. He held the mug in his tiny hands, took bigger gulps, thinking it would make the dryness go away. But it didn't. And as his father's hand came down to stroke his hair, he felt his lips begin to tremble, his throat constrict.

“Vati…” he said.

“Mmhm?”

And he looked at his father eyes welling with tears. “Mutti….” he said. And the tears fell. “Muuttiii,” he said again, the word drawn out in a sob. And then his father was pushing his hair out of his face, soothing a hand along his head.

“Gilbert,” he said, worry etched into every inch of his face. “What's wrong with Mutti?”

“M-Mutti s-said I can't tell you,” he hiccuped.

“Can't tell me what, son?”

That was when Gilbert said the man's name, said that Mutti wanted him to be their new Vati.

“But I don't want him to be!” cried Gilbert. “I want you, Vati, I want you!”

And Gilbert cried and cried into his father chest as he was pulled close, as his father shushed him as rubbed at his back, told him that it was okay, that he loved him.

Gilbert still didn't know how his father had managed not to go straight upstairs where his mother slept, wake her from her peaceful sleep and make her aware of the hell she'd driven herself into. Instead, he held Gilbert close, waited for him to fall asleep.

The next morning, Gilbert found himself in his own bed, awakened by the smell of breakfast. Ludwig's bed was empty. When he went downstairs, he found his father at the stove cooking, found his brother swinging his legs as he sat on the counter. His father was supposed to be at work. They both said good morning to him, told him breakfast was nearly ready, and Gilbert wondered if he was dreaming, if last night had been a dream and he was still in it.

“Where's Mutti?” he asked, rubbing at his eyes.

“Mutti's getting a pamper,” Ludwig said.

“Getting *pampered*,” corrected their father.

Gilbert hadn't realized it at the time, but that morning had been the beginning of the divorce. Their father had sent their mother on a “relaxation getaway,” a full day at the spa. It had been a means to get her out of the house while their father packed up all their things. They were going to Opa's for the weekend, he'd said, just the three of them, and Gilbert's wariness quickly became excitement, because not only was he going to spend some time with his father, he was going to see his Opa, and have yummy hot chocolate before bed. And so after they ate breakfast, he packed all of their things, loaded up the car, and off they went. Gilbert could still remember the joy he felt, the wind in his hair as his father drove down the highway, Ludwig pointing in awe of all the fluffy clouds in the bright blue sky. Now he knew just how dark that day had really been.

It was a bitter divorce. A year-long custody battle in which his unfaithful, manipulative mother agrued against their largely inattentive father. All while they lived under their

grandfather's roof. Gilbert and Ludwig never truly knew what was happening behind the scenes though, and as ugly as the divorce was, Gilbert could say that he was thankful he and his brother stayed fairly innocent throughout it. Arriving at Grandpa Fritz's house that day felt just like any other summer visit.

Like always, Gilbert and Ludwig waved and shouted through the windows from their car seats at the old man standing at his front door. He'd waved back just as frantically and Gilbert remembered wriggling his legs and whining because his dad was unbuckling his seat too slowly for his liking. Mutti was never this slow, he remembered thinking. Remembered already missing her in that moment, despite the scary faces she made sometimes when Gilbert did something wrong.

Once they were finally released from their little car seats they ran full speed for Grandpa's front porch, and giggled as they barreled themselves straight into his arms. Gilbert blabbed about how many clouds he'd counted on the car ride over, Ludwig showed off his favorite stuffed toy, and both boys squealed upon hearing what Opa had made them for lunch. Opa lived on the outskirts of town in a big, big house surrounded by open fields. It was a lot quieter and life was a lot slower than what the boys were used to, but visiting their Opa was something they always looked forward to.

In that year of staying in the countryside, just the four of them, they were spoiled even more so than usual, and now Gilbert knew that was because his father and grandfather were trying to compensate for, keep hidden really, what was happening behind the scenes. The meetings with divorce lawyers, the court hearings, he and Ludwig knew nothing of them.

By now Gilbert knew that niether of his parents were innocent. He knew that his father had been an emotionally absent husband, knew that he'd had his priorities screwed up where work and family were concerned. He knew that his mother was a cheater, was horrible with money (racking up tons of credit card debt with her online shopping addiction, something Gilbert had only learned from his father in the last few years), and had taken advantage of her children's love for her.

It was fucked. He knew it was, and yet for some years it was his reality. It was all he knew. And he winced when he looked back on his first year as a young boy in a shiny new country, remembering all the times he'd talked to his new friends about his mother's “secret boyfriend” like it was normal. Like every child had unfaithful parents. God bless Toni and the twins, Gilbert thought, because he was a fucked up little kid, and it was a wonder they didn't write him off.

They'd made a new life for themselves in the States, though. And Gilbert had enjoyed the change from seeing his father behind a glaring computer screen at most hours of the day, to seeing him lug laundry baskets around the house and mix things in the kitchen and waving at them from the car as he dropped them at school in the morning. Things their mother used to do.

Some nights, he and Ludwig would wake crying for their mother. They were too young to know that she had chosen the now faceless man over them, and so Gilbert was sure his father had been overwhelmed with relief the day the crying stopped. Because what really was the right way to tell your children that their mother was mentally unstable?

But they managed, had fun even, settling into their new life abroad. It was only when they reached their preteens that things started to go rocky again, when their father was away every few weeks, not able to help Gilbert with his math homework, not there to be Ludwig's Saturday morning chess opponent, or simply enjoy a good home cooked meal with his sons. Of course, now they knew why he wasn't there.

Ludwig had always been the more rational brother. He didn't enjoy their father's increasing absence, but he had to work to provide for them, he'd reasoned. If anything, he'd said, it just meant they had to make the most of their time together when he *was* home.

Gilbert, on the other hand, wasn't so forgiving. To see his father turning back into the distant man he used to be, both physically and emotionally, was too much for him to handle. Finding out the real reason why their father had been away so much had just made forgiving him three times as hard. Had Gilbert known sooner why his father became less present, maybe he wouldn't have acted out the way he had in school, skipping class, disrupting class on days when he did decide to go, getting into fights with people who ridiculed the way he looked. He wouldn't have snapped at Ludwig all the times he had. If he'd known…he wouldn't have dug himself into an even deeper hole once he found out the truth.

“Gilbert…”

Ludwig's voice brought Gilbert back. Ludwig could see the expression on Gilbert's face, something caught between guilt and frustration.

“Dad should've told us the truth. There's no second-guessing it. He should have.” He watched Gilbert release a breath, his shoulders falling. Ludwig looked down at the glass at his feet. The cup was broken beyond repair. And yet the sight of it made him hopeful, because while Ludwig knew his family was cracked, splintered, he knew that it could be fixed, knew that there was still hope.

“After all we'd seen growing up...with Mom and Dad, and the divorce, we knew that the world wasn't all flowers and rainbows. We deserved to know well before last summer.” He looked back up at Gilbert. “He was wrong, and you're right to be angry with him. I was too, but I…” He looked away, blushed. “Well let's just say I gave Feli an earful, and having him there to listen...made it easier to forgive him.”

Gilbert laughed suddenly, softly. “Holy shit.” Ludwig looked at him again, looking puzzled this time. “I…” Gilbert said, and now he was blushing too. “I talked Matt's ear off too. These...past few days.”

Ludwig's eyebrows rose in surprise. “You told Matthew about you and Dad?”

Gilbert nodded, and Ludwig couldn't help but be shocked, because with how Gilbert was constantly avoiding the topic with him, his own brother, and with his closest friends, Ludwig had been positive he hadn't yet told Matthew. Gilbert was crazy about him, and it would have been a lot for Gilbert to tear down the image of himself he'd presented to Matthew, a guy who had a good relationship with his father despite his demanding job. A guy who was totally fine with the reasons why his family situation was a bit more complicated than most. A guy who took it all in stride.

Ludwig had been in earshot a few times when Matthew asked Gilbert about their dad, had listened to Gilbert talk about phone conversations he knew had never been had, to him talk about the contents of postcards he'd found in the trash. Gilbert was playing a role, and really, Ludwig couldn't blame him for doing so. Their family had issues, had always had issues, and Gilbert wasn't ready to share them just yet. Ludwig had respected that, and said nothing, as did their friends. But now...Matthew knew, and suddenly, the way Gilbert came through the door this morning made so much more sense.

“I told him everything, Lud,” he said, leaving forward on the tabletop again, again face to face with his blurry reflection. He saw a small smile on his lips. “Not just about Dad.”

“Everything?”

“About Mom...the divorce. All the fights I got into, how...depressed I was. I told him about all of it. And I kept thinking that the more I told him, the more he'd realize that he made a mistake in being with me.” He laughed again, the same soft sound, rubbed at his neck. “And then he told me he fucking loved me, again.”

“Gilbert…that's incredible you were able to tell him...everything. And that he was willing to listen.”

“Yeah,” he said sheepishly. “I honestly can't believe he actually listened to all of it.”

Ludwig smiled a bit. “When you left on Friday, all I wanted was for you to be happy, and I knew being with Matthew would help you do that. I just didn't know he'd help bring all of you back.”

Gilbert felt a pang from within his chest, a tug that somehow how hurt and comforted him all the same. Because he'd closed himself off from his brother, and now he wasn't anymore. He wasn't anymore, and Ludwig wanted him to know how much he appreciated it. It hurt to know how long Ludwig must've ignored his own feelings to give Gilbert space. But it felt good to know that despite the space Gilbert had put between them, Ludwig had never stopped trying to close the gap.

“I'm really sorry, Lud.” Gilbert was still looking down at the table. “I've been a real dick to you ever since I stopped talking to Dad.”

“No, you hav—”

“*Yes*, I have,” he said, looking back over at him. “Maybe not all the time. But whenever Dad came up, I just...shut down and pushed you away and...I'm really fucking sorry. You didn't deserve that.” He carded a hand through his hair, shook his head. “Can you forgive me?”

“I already have,” he said, a hand at Gilbert's shoulder. “I'm just...happy we're here now.”

“Yeah…” Gilbert said as his brother pulled away. “Me too.” He sighed, scratching at the table. “Lud, I...I wanna talk to him, but I don't even know what I'd say. I told him that he was the reason Mom went crazy.” He felt his stomach turn; it had been a low blow, and he'd

known it the moment he said it. He'd been hurting, and he'd wanted his father to hurt too. But now...he just felt like a monster.

“Gilbert,” Ludwig said, “everytime he calls, he asks me about you. Every single time. There's no reason for me to believe he hasn't forgiven you. I know he has.”

When Gilbert looked over at him, Ludwig could see that his eyes were glassy. But he was smiling. “I...can't wait to tell him about Matt.”

Ludwig smiled back, and for the first time in a long time, he felt that things were only changing for the better.

More Than Just...

Chapter Summary

> It was in moments like this that Alfred was reminded of the question Matthew had asked him last December. It was in moments, just like this, that he was reminded of the love he'd found in someone, and of how happy he was that Matthew had found that feeling in someone too.

Chapter Notes

> AKA: a snapshot of how fling became thing. Enjoy this slight intermission from the main pairing to explore Alfred and Ivan's emotional growth over time :)

⠠⠝⠑⠺ ⠠⠽⠕⠗⠅ ⠠⠉⠊⠞⠽

Alfred smiled as he entered the school gymnasium, pleased to find some of his team already at work, laying down the mats, heaving them out onto the floor from the storage room. The scent of disinfectant wafted into the air as the mats were unrolled, the result of the team's cleaning them after practice the day before (as they did at the end of each practice). Alfred breathed in deeply, appreciating the clean, sterile scent, and knowing that it wouldn't be long before it disappeared, replaced with the stench of sweat. But, as Coach had once told them, if the gym didn't absolutely reek once they'd finished, then they weren't working hard enough. It was no wonder Matthew only sat in on his practices as a last resort.

His teammates chatted amongst themselves as they worked, barked at each other to move the mats *this way, dumbass* and *no, that way, you dipshit*, all the while grinning and whispering and cackling with one another about inane things Alfred had become so used to overhearing.

“Dude, did you see the new Destiny Chronicles trailer? The combat was so damn smooth! I gotta get it on preorder.”

“I dunno, man, I feel like Jamie's been kinda giving me the cold shoulder lately. Like, today she barely talked to me when I walked her to class…I didn't fuck this up, did I?”

“Yeah, whatever. I'm totally gonna ace this exam on Friday. And when I do, you can give me back that twenty bucks.”

Alfred grinned and returned a chorus of greetings as he passed by, his fellow teammates briefly stopping their conversations to yell out a “Hey, Cap!” or “What’s up, Al?”

Normally, Alfred would join them in setting up, but today was Monday, which meant that he had to meet with Coach to brief him on the team's happenings. How the team was getting along, who had been improving on their form, what kind of drills he recommended to prepare for the next meet, and so on. Coach was a pleasant man to be around, always laughing and joking, so Alfred looked forward to the weekly meetings. He grinned again as he listened to the growing ruckus in the locker room. These guys were something else with all the energy they brought to practices.

Alfred had started wrestling in junior high. He'd actually wanted to try out for football, but it was a hard and fast no from his parents, who had lectured him about how dangerous of a sport it was. Alfred, about fourteen at the time, had been so annoyed with them, moaning as his father said he wouldn't have his son “crashing” into other children in the name of “sport,” groaning as his papa told him there were many other sports he could explore, like basketball, volleyball, or even tennis.

And so, Alfred spent his sixth grade year reluctantly searching for a different outlet for his seemingly boundless energy.

Basketball wasn't for him. He'd tried out and made the team, and while he was decent on the court, he didn't particularly enjoy feeling like he was in a constant popularity contest, or having his whole identity lost to being a part of “the team.” It got old fast, with students he didn't even know gushing over how many points he'd scored at a certain game, or his teammates betting on which groups of girls would scream their names the loudest. He'd quickly dropped it once the season had ended.

Next came volleyball. Alfred hadn't even made it past tryouts. The volleyball coach had said he'd had great endurance and strength, but that he'd needed to work on his control of the ball. And Alfred hadn't argued with her...he must have hit the ball straight into the gym ceiling lights at least three times, and almost strucken a fellow player in the face with said ball more than twice. So, maybe he wasn't quite ready to face the net.

As volleyball tryouts came to a close and Alfred found himself cheering up other rejectees with silly jokes, the coach had come up to him and asked if he'd thought about trying out for the wrestling team. He'd answered her question with one of his own. They had a wrestling team? And Alfred remembered her laughing, as if it was a question she'd heard many times before.

At her suggestion, Alfred had decided to try out for the team, despite his being completely oblivious to its existence beforehand. He knew nothing about the sport at all, so he made sure to do some research a few weeks before tryouts, watch some videos online and learn the technicals so he didn't show up and embarrass himself.

Ultimately, Alfred made the wrestling team, and though he powered through all the drills, he was definitely the least experienced one there. Had he been in high school and not middle school, Alfred doubted he would've made the cut, but his coach back then was more concerned with introducing more kids to the sport than getting the best of the best, and Alfred was thankful for having been given a chance.

True, wrestling wasn't as popular as the other school's sports. The wrestling team wasn’t showered in “school spirit” in the hallways like the basketball team was. Students weren't snatching up tickets to watch wrestling meets like they were for football or volleyball games. But for Alfred, that was a huge plus, because he didn't play sports for notoriety, he played them for his own enjoyment.

Having wrestled regularly for five years now, Alfred had long left his novice title behind. While he wasn't pro material (nor was he interested in being), he most certainly had found his element. Alfred couldn't exactly remember when he'd transitioned from sitting on the sidelines and watching examples to *being* the example, or from mentee to mentor, but even so, he'd come to realize that he really enjoyed being in this role, being someone other people could look to for guidance. It was why he so cherished being co-captain of this team.

“Give it back, you assholes!”

“Come and get it, it's right here!”

“Oops! Now it's over here!”

Alfred frowned as three boys sprinted out of the locker room, two tossing a pair of compression shorts back and forth while the third flapped his arms between them, trying and failing to intercept them.

He frowned and sighed. Freshmen. He clapped his hands together. “Alright, guys, cut it out!” he boomed. Though his tone held no real anger, it was heavy with authority, and the three boys all froze where they stood, the shorts landing on the gym floor. “So you decide to just fool around while the rest of your team is hard at work?”

Alfred stood as each boy stumbled and stuttered over their own words. “Andy,” he said, addressing the owner of the stolen shorts, “go and finish changing so you can help everyone set up, alright?”

The boy flushed as Alfred picked his shorts up from the floor, handing them to him. “Thanks, Captain,” he said, sending a triumphant smirk to his friends as he walked off.

“Now as for you two,” said Alfred, arms crossed at his chest. He gave a brilliant smile. “Ten minutes on the bleachers.” The boys grimaced, deflated. “And I don't wanna see you stop running until time is up.”

“Make that twelve.”

Alfred's eyes widened as a familiar voice hit his ears, feeling a presence walk up on him from behind. He turned around to see his boyfriend wearing a smile, bundled in a jacket with his favorite scarf at his neck. “Ivan,” he said.

“You don't have a problem with that, do you? Seth? Kevin?” he asked the two boys, his smile too friendly to be anything other than terrifying. A classic from Captain Ivan.

“N-No, Captain,” said Seth, “We're on it. C'mon,” he said hurriedly to the other boy, pulling him towards the bleachers.

“S-Sorry, Captain!” Kevin said as he was dragged away.

“Ivan,” Alfred said again, just as surprised as the first time he'd spoken his name. He reached out to place his hand at Ivan's arm, but stopped himself as he remembered where they were, who was watching.

It wasn't as if the rest of the team didn't know they were together, they definitely knew, because he and Ivan had told them so themselves.

It was sometime last October (shortly after he and Ivan had decided to quit fooling themselves and make it official) that Alfred and Ivan had made the “announcement,” though it was something that they hadn't even known they were going to do.

They'd walked into the locker room one afternoon after practice to gather their gym bags for the ride home, finding it odd that the room was so quiet. Usually it was bursting with chatter, with boys yelling and hooping and doing dumb things as they celebrated the end of another successful practice. This time though, there was none of that, and just as Alfred turned to Ivan to comment on it, a murmur of voices towards the back of the room reached their ears.

“You don't feel like something's changed between them?”

“What do you mean?”

“Man, are you blind? Last year it was like they had this whole rivalry thing going on, but now it's like they’re kind of…close?”

Both Alfred and Ivan had stopped when they realized that *they* were the reason this locker room was so quiet, the reason why their peers were whispering amongst themselves. They'd looked at each other, then back in the direction of where the voices were coming from. Alfred had peeked around the corner. It was the entire team (excluding Alfred and Ivan, of course). All twenty-three of them, some lounging around on benches, others grabbing things out of their lockers.

“I mean, they *are* our captains now. They kinda have to work together.”

“No, smartass.” The slam of a locker door shutting closed echoed from the walls. “It's more than just 'working together.’ I feel like they've got a thing for each other. Which if they do, that's cool, I guess.”

“What? Really?”

“Dude, me too! I thought it was just me. You've seen the way they smile at each other, right?”

The group became progressively louder in their excitement, much to Alfred's amusement, and Ivan's displeasure. Ivan hadn't actually been upset at the time, though, just mildly annoyed. Why gossip like little school girls when they could go straight to the source for their

answers? As the boys continued on, though, handing down their own declarations of support, Ivan found himself growing a little less so.

“It's definitely not just you, I've seen it too. Honestly, if they're happy, I don't see a problem with it.”

“Me neither. As long as they don't start giving each other Eskimo kisses and calling each other 'pookie.’ I saw enough of that shit on the football field.”

The room erupted with laughter.

“I think they'd make a good power couple.”

“What the hell is a power couple?”

There was a lone laugh then.

“So now they're a couple because they smile at each other? You guys are so full of shit.”

This was the moment that Alfred had decided to come out of hiding, knowing that if he stood there listening any longer, he was sure to burst out laughing. “Well, actually,” he said, “they're spot on.”

The room had gone dead silent as Alfred approached the rest of the team, Ivan towering slightly over him from behind. Seeing the absolute terror, shock, and utter mortification on all his fellow teammates’ faces was quite satisfying for Ivan, and his smile was one of genuine pleasure as he said, “And do not worry, I can assure you that we will keep our noses, and other parts, to ourselves.”

They'd spent the whole ride home that afternoon snickering at how many red faces they'd left behind, and enjoying the freedom that came with having their relationship out in the open.

So yes, the team knew, but both Alfred and Ivan had agreed to keep things professional. It just made things more comfortable for everyone, Alfred and Ivan included.

Alfred blushed a bit and retracted his hand. He just really hadn't expected to see Ivan at practice today, so while he was confused, he was still pleased to see his boyfriend nonetheless. Ivan's nose was a little bit red, presumably from the cold, and Alfred found it rather cute. “I thought you'd already be gone by now. What are you doing here?”

Ivan slipped his hands into his jacket pockets, lest he slip up himself. Ivan could see that Alfred had already put in his contacts, as he always did before he set foot on the mat. Those eyes, Ivan thought, he could never escape their charm.

He remembered watching in fascination one afternoon in the locker room as Alfred placed a lens in each eye, not really caring that Alfred was glaring at his reflection in the mirror and calling him a “total creep.” He'd been amused with the way Alfred had grimaced at his own reflection once he'd finished, how he'd mumbled about how “weird” he looked without his frames. Ivan had told him, quite genuinely, that he looked nice either way. He would never

forget watching Alfred's face turn a lovely pink hue, or the way he'd laughed to himself and given a soft “thanks, dude.”

It was the same sheepish little laugh Alfred often made when he wriggled from between Ivan's arms to grab his glasses from wherever they'd been abandoned, usually Ivan's nightstand, Alfred's dresser, or maybe one of their bedroom floors.

“You're blushing.” He remembered Alfred saying once he'd slipped his glasses back onto his face, hovering over him from above. It was the fifth time they'd slept together, and Ivan remembered how much longer they'd stayed in each other's arms than the times before, and how softly they'd spoken to each other within the confines of his room, still bickering and yet in a way that made each other smile. “I don't think I've ever seen you do that before.”

And Ivan had looked away from those brilliantly blue eyes, feeling his face heat even more. “How can I not when you are staring at me so closely?”

“The world's in HD again. I've gotta take it all in.” Alfred's hair had been so messy as he smiled down at Ivan. “You know...you’re pretty cute when you're not being a total dick.”

“Fredka,” he'd said, finding satisfaction in the way Alfred's cheeks came to match his own, “surely you can seduce me without insulting me right after.”

And Alfred had smirked, lying back down at Ivan's side. “I’ll stop when you do.”

“Hm.” Ivan had smiled and reached over to drape his arm over Alfred's waist, enjoying the way Alfred's body relaxed against him. “I suppose that is fair.”

Yes, the way Alfred had looked at him then, the way those eyes were looking at him *now*, made Ivan feel so incredibly warm. He held back a chuckle at Alfred's expression, caught between confusion and excitement, as he gave his answer.

“I just wanted to let you know that Matvey will be coming with me today. He said he forgot to tell you at lunch, so I wanted to drop by before we left. I'll make sure he gets home safely, of course.”

“Oh,” Alfred said with a smile, “sounds good. What’s this, the third week in a row? I think Matt's addicted.”

Ivan chuckled. “There are worse things to be addicted to.”

Alfred laughed as well, watching Ivan glance over at the boys running through the bleachers and then back to him. “Freshmen, right?”

“Hm,” was all Ivan replied with, his mouth quirking into small smile.

Alfred frowned, his hand reaching out again only to freeze and fall back at his side. “You alright, big guy?”

“I’m fine,” said Ivan, but Alfred noticed the way his hands seemed to shift in his pockets, as if restless.

“Hey, Rob!” Alfred called out to one of the boys setting up the mats, waving him over. The boy quickly jogged over to him, expression one of surprise when he spotted Ivan standing next to him.

“Hey, Captain,” the boy said as he addressed Ivan. “Good to see you,” he said. Ivan could hear genuine excitement in the boy's voice, and it surprised him.

“Rob,” Ivan said. “Alfred tells me you managed to pin someone in forty-five seconds last practice. That is quite impressive.”

Rob let out a little laugh, rubbing at his neck. “Thanks. Just gotta make sure it won't be a one time thing.” He then looked to Alfred. “You, uh, wanted me for something?”

“Yeah,” Alfred said. “You see those two on the bleachers over there?” Rob made an affirmative noise. “They're doing a bit of extra cardio over there for slacking off. Watch them for me while Ivan and I go fetch some things from the storage room.”

“Alright, sure thing.”

Alfred glanced at Ivan, eyes beckoning him to follow, before turning on his heel and heading for the storage room.

Ivan followed quickly, though not so quickly as to draw attention. “Alfred,” he whispered from a few steps behind, “Do you not have to meet with Coach?” He put on a small smile and waved at the boys who greeted him, again, feeling surprised. They were just hiding their true feelings, Ivan was sure of it.

“I’ll just meet with him after practice, he'll be fine,” Alfred said, nonchalant. He pushed open the door to the room, holding it open until Ivan reached it. The room was as stuffy as ever and not as clean as it could've been, heavy weights strewn in one corner, extra headgear in a pile in another corner; they'd have to do a spring cleaning some time soon. He headed further to the back of the room, opening the heavy metal door that led outside.

Ivan gasped. “What are you doing? You are not properly dressed.”

“I’ll be fine, dude. C'mon,” he said, waving for Ivan to follow him. Ivan was right, it was thirty degrees outside; not the coldest it had been that March, but definitely not appropriate weather for the gym shorts he was wearing. He didn't care though; he didn't want to risk another student walking in on them. Besides, he was wearing a sweatshirt, so at least his top half would stay warm.

Ivan hurried to the door, following Alfred outside. “Fredka, do you *want* to become sick?” he asked incredulously, all but ripping his scarf from his own neck to place around Alfred's.

Alfred looked at Ivan's worried face as the soft ribbon of pink was wrapped around his neck. The scarf was warm and smelled like him, and it nearly made Alfred sigh. He placed his hands over Ivan's, stopped them from fussing with the scarf. Ivan looked from the scarf to Alfred's face as his hands were returned to his sides, Alfred's bare fingers slipping between his gloved ones. Those eyes seemed to search him.

“So, I'm gonna ask you again,” said Alfred. “Is everything alright?” Sure, Ivan had said he'd come to tell him about Matthew, but he could've easily texted Alfred that. He hadn't really needed to come in person, especially when he had somewhere he needed to be after this. “Is Kat okay?”

“Yes, she is fine,” Ivan answered, curling his fingers around Alfred's.

“How about Nat?”

“Natalya is fine too,” he said. “Fredka, I…”

“Yes? What is it?” Alfred's voice was uncharacteristically soft.

“I just wanted to apologize.”

Alfred frowned. “For what?”

“My absence. Here. I am supposed to be leading this team together with you, and yet I have been becoming less and less present. I am sure my absence must be frustrating for everyone else too. I just...did not realize how much I was needed at the shop.”

The shop Ivan spoke of was his late grandfather's flower shop, a quaint storefront that was just a few blocks away from the Braginsky residence. The first time Alfred had visited it was early last year, when Ivan had driven him there. At the time, Coach had been on leave for a few weeks after a bad car accident had dislocated his shoulder, so the team had been brainstorming ways they could welcome him back. They had all agreed on flowers and a nice card signed by everyone, and when someone made a comment about how the local supermarket had “pretty nice flowers,” Ivan had made a face and said he'd “take care of it.”

“Dude, you never told me your family owns a *flower shop*!” Alfred had said as they'd pulled up to said shop. And Alfred remembered thinking Ivan was a smartass when he'd responded with a shrug, a small smile on his face as he said that he didn't realize Alfred was “so interested in him.”

But as he and Ivan grew unexpectedly closer, Alfred discovered that there was a reason Ivan had never mentioned it before. As vibrant and colorful as the storefront was, flowers of all types in tasteful displays, there was a lot of pain associated with the place. As sweet and lovely as his sister Kat’s smile was each time Alfred dropped by, he'd come to know just how much suffering had had to take place before those beautiful blooms could spring back to life. Alfred had learned this only when he and Ivan began to really *look* at each other, look *to* each other, when they began to want to be *more* to each other. More than just conveniently there.

The shop had actually started, Alfred had learned, right out of the Braginsky's backyard, nothing more than a way for Ivan's grandfather to unwind from his work as a university researcher. It was only when neighbors started knocking on their door, enamored with the bushes of honeysuckle and rose that lined their front yard, that his grandfather had turned his hobby into a business.

As a young boy of twelve in a very new, very intimidating, very English-speaking country, Ivan often breathed a sigh of relief when he came home off the bus from school, pushing open his front door to see a living room full of potted flowers, always neatly arranged and ready to be sent to the shop to be sold. Pansies, marigolds, sweet peas, chamomiles---it was a sight that never ceased to excite him. And during the warmer months, Ivan often found himself abandoning his backpack at the door as he rushed to the backyard, eager to see how much taller the sunflowers had grown. Ivan had told Alfred of the fond memories he'd had of that time, of how Yekaterina, or Katyusha as Ivan fondly called her, would measure he and Natalya's heights against those bright yellow flowers, of how Natalya had pouted when Ivan seemed to be growing much faster than she.

Indeed, Ivan had many dear memories of that time, of planting and pruning and watering each plant with his grandfather and his sisters, his hands dirty with earth. He even enjoyed helping out at the shop on weekends (though he didn't enjoy the neverending sting of old ladies pinching his cheeks; he'd been so grateful for the summer when puberty had hit him like a brick, ridding him of his youthfully chubby cheeks).

It had all changed when their grandfather suddenly passed, a heart attack in his sleep. It was poor Katyusha who had found him in his bed the morning of, letting out a scream that had woken fourteen-year-old Ivan from his sleep, a sound he told Alfred he would never forget. So many things had seemed to happen all at once, the shop closing, the wake, Katyusha dropping out of university and taking on multiple jobs to support he and Natalya. It had been hard on everyone, but perhaps most for his older sister. Not only did she lose a loved one, but she'd also had to put her own life on hold to become head of the household and guardian to two children, at 25. At an age where she was supposed to be figuring her own self out.

Ivan often told Alfred how he worried about Katyusha, that he worried that she was working too hard, eating too little. Alfred became the person he would go to when he felt his younger sister slipping away, falling into one of her depressive episodes, refusing to leave her room. Alfred was there when Ivan stewed in his own guilt at how unfairly his older sister's life had been put on hold.

That guilt was why when the shop finally reopened a year later, Ivan helped out whenever and wherever he could. Ivan hadn't even wanted her to reopen the shop (it would be nothing but stress, it would hurt too much, Ivan had argued), but when Katyusha had said reopening would make it possible to work only two jobs instead of three, and that she thought it would make their grandfather happy, that it would make *her* happy to be surrounded by flowers again, Ivan couldn't fight her any longer.

So Ivan helped. It was the least he could do to make his sister's life no more difficult than it had to be. Especially when she refused to let him find a job of his own, insisting that he should focus solely on his schooling. When he was younger, Katyusha wouldn't allow him to work shifts at the store, so instead, he would help close up in the afternoons, and clean the shop daily. Natalya would help too, ordering more stock for the shop and demanding her big sister teach her how to arrange bouquets, how to keep flowers fresher longer, anything so that Katyusha wasn't doing everything alone, as she certainly would have tried to do if her siblings weren't so persistent.

As Ivan moved on to high school, he ignored Katyusha's protests and began to work weekends at the shop. He could help out at the shop while still focusing on school during the week; it was something his sister hadn't been able to argue against. And so for the past two years, that had been Ivan's routine, working weekends at his family's storefront.

It was only recently that business at the shop had started to pick up more than usual. The few days before Valentine's Day were busy, of course, but especially because of the impending snow storm. The store had experienced a rush of customers as they'd tried to buy their flowers before the store was forced to close. That was the first week that Ivan began to miss practices. Alfred had known the reason why, had shushed him when Ivan tried to apologize, told him "not to sweat it." Coach had also understood when Ivan told him.

But then his sister had received a client who wanted a few of their custom-made bouquets to be displayed at her wedding reception. It was nothing out of the ordinary, as they received many clients from funeral and wedding services. But as it turned out, this particular client had a large online following, and had raved and raved about her "absolutely divine" experience she'd had with their services.

Overnight, Katyusha began receiving tons of calls, and Ivan began to see faces in the shop he'd never seen before. Suddenly he had men twice his age looking to him for advice, looking sheepish as they asked which flowers would look nice for a baby shower, or whispering that they'd heard this was "the place to go." Ivan remembered being impressed by how patient Natalya was with the way she handled groups of women as they flooded in on Sunday morning, squealing about how their arrangements looked "just like the pictures on Anna's blog."

It was an amazing boost in income. So much so that Katyusha managed to afford to go back to school to continue pursuing her master's, albeit online. But all that success meant that Ivan couldn't just work weekends anymore. He needed to be there during the week too, and this time, Katyusha didn't fight him on it, because she too knew it was true. Ivan found himself turning into his older sister as he told Natalya that no, she was not going to join him, that she needed to focus on her studies. His little sister had been so young when the family had fallen into despair, and now that they were finally stable, he wasn't going to have her life consumed by constant worry of their finances.

So now here Ivan was, apologizing again for being away, for being so busy with making sure his big sister wasn't dealing with a workload she couldn't handle. He looked down at Alfred, noticing that his cheeks had started to turn red from the cold. And he found himself wanting to apologize again, wanting to pull Alfred into his arms, because of course. Of course Alfred would willingly turn himself into an icicle for Ivan's sake.

"Seriously, Ivan?" Alfred laughed as he said it, though it wasn't at all malicious. In fact, the way he'd laughed, so softly and fondly, made Ivan's face go warm. "We aren't training them for the Olympics, this is high school wrestling. Yeah, it sucks I can only embarrass you in front of these guys two days a week now, but your family's more important than some after school hobby."

"You are not...overwhelmed?"

“No, dude, I'm not. Like I said, this is high school. If a high school sport is stressing me out, then I need to get my priorities straight. The real question is, are *you* overwhelmed?” In being with Ivan, in getting to know him and the hardship he'd been made to know so young, Alfred realized more than ever before just how privileged he was. His parents were both healthy adults, making salaries that, for him, made it possible for a part-time job to be an option rather than a necessity. “I know you said things are slowing down during the week, but really...things are still alright at home?”

Ivan nodded. “Things are good. Especially with Katyusha back in school now. I think it is good for her to have other things to strive for outside of work. And Natalya seems to be enjoying spending time with her friends.”

Alfred nodded, glad to hear that Ivan's sisters were doing well. But what he cared about most was his boyfriend's well being. “And you?” he said, squeezing Ivan's hands. It was the third time he was asking, but he wouldn't have it any other way. “Tell me about *you*, Vanya.”

Ivan blushed as those eyes looked at him again, soft, full of a genuine *need* to know. And oh, the way Alfred said his name, so unlike the motherly coo that came from Katyusha, or the teasing tone that came from Natasha. No, when Alfred said it, it was full of love. A kind of love that family couldn't give.

That was when Ivan finally did what he'd wanted to since they left the gym. And why he'd waited so long to he didn't really know. They were alone now, and he could hold Alfred as tightly and as closely as he wanted. So he did, pulling Alfred into him, wrapping his arms around either side of him and sighing into the top of his head as he kissed it. “I am just fine, Fredka,” he said. “Thank you.”

Alfred smiled and returned Ivan's embrace, let Ivan's warmth and scent envelope his body. They stayed there a while until Alfred pulled away just a bit, looked up at Ivan.

It was in moments like this that Alfred was reminded of the question Matthew had asked him last December.

“Is that how it was for you and Ivan?”

It was in moments, just like this, that he was reminded of the love he'd found in someone, and of how happy he was that Matthew had found that feeling in someone too.

“Everyone misses the hell out of you when you aren't around, but no one's bent out of shape over it. No one's frustrated. And you know Coach understands. You know that, don't you? He wouldn't even let you give someone else the co-captain title 'cause he knows how much you deserve it. So what if you're here a little less. No one's upset at you for it. Especially not me.”

Ivan smiled as Alfred brought his head against his chest again.

“'Kay?” said Alfred, voiced muffled against Ivan's jacket.

“Okay,” said Ivan, bringing his hand to stroke Alfred's head. There was a pause before he added, “Though I hope you know that it is *me* who embarrasses *you* on the mat. Your spladle

technique is getting rusty."

"Yeah, you wish," Alfred scoffed, bringing a lazy fist to connect with his broad back. He pulled back again so he was clearly heard. His smile was a playful one as he said, "You better not have left Mattie to freeze to death."

Ivan laughed. "I turned on the heater and left my keys. He is keeping warm."

"Good. Call me before you go to bed?"

"If you promise not to fall asleep on me."

"Cross my heart," Alfred said with a grin, though both of them knew that chances he'd keep his promise were slim. But it was okay. Because Ivan thought Alfred's snoring was one of the most endearing sounds he'd ever heard.

"Hm," said Ivan, closing in on Alfred's lips. "We will see about that."

Forward

Chapter Summary

> In him, Matthew saw himself.
>
> In him, Ivan saw someone he'd very nearly missed, and was glad he hadn't after all.
>
> And in himself, Gilbert saw that while his past had shaped him, shaped others' image of him, it certainly wouldn't define him. He would keep bettering himself, and show everyone who'd helped him along the way just how grateful he was for it.

Chapter Notes

> Welcome back, everyone! And to the new readers who have recently followed, so glad to have you! Please enjoy, and as always, thanks for your support and encouragement.

See the end of the chapter for more notes

⠠⠶⠒⠤⠒⠄ ⠤⠶

Ivan's car was warm, and Matthew snuggled into himself. It was dangerous, to be this comfortable at this time of day. If he fell asleep now, he'd have trouble getting to sleep later that night, so he blinked a few times, sat up in his seat and reached for the radio dial, sure that a bit of music would pull him out of his daze. As he was feeling around for the dial, though, his phone suddenly began vibrating in his pocket. He quickly fished it out, recognizing the series of buzzes as a call from Gilbert.

“Hello?” he answered as he brought the phone to his ear.

“Mattie, are you still in the parking lot?” came Gilbert's voice, sounding out of breath.

“Yeah, Ivan hasn't made it back yet. Why?”

“Oh, thank God,” Gilbert huffed out, clearly relieved for some reason.

“What's wrong? Are you okay?”

“Nothing, just, I'm coming to you right now so stay put, alright?”

“Okay?” Matthew gave a little frown as the line went dead.

Gilbert was staying after school today to meet with one of his old teachers. It was a meeting that Matthew knew he'd been on edge about all day, so when they'd said their goodbyes in front of Matthew's locker at the end of the day, Matthew had squeezed Gilbert's hand in his and whispered words of reassurance between what little space remained between them. After, Gilbert had placed one last kiss against Matthew's forehead, warning Ivan to drive safely before they headed out for the parking lot. That was just ten minutes ago.

Ivan had wanted to talk to Alfred before they left, so as Matthew sunk back into the passenger seat, enjoying the whirring heater of Ivan's car, Ivan promised him that he wouldn't be long and showed him which button to press if he got too hot. That was five minutes ago.

Matthew slipped his phone back into his pocket, his desire to doze long gone. What could be so urgent that Gilbert found it necessary to rush back out into the cold when he had a teacher to meet with? Suddenly, a thought came to him and Matthew reached down to the floor, satisfied when he felt his folded cane.

Embarrassing as it was to remember, he had indeed forgotten his cane once before in Gilbert's car (the first time he'd ever done so in his sixteen years), all because Gilbert had taken it upon himself to turn a quick kiss goodnight into a reminder of just how good they'd gotten at using their tongues for something other than tasting. His mind definitely hadn't been all the way there when he stepped out of the car and up his driveway, too focused on his tingling lips to realize he'd left the very thing that helped him get around. He could still remember the way Gilbert had snickered over the phone that same night, when he called to tell him he'd bring it to school the next day. And he'd simultaneously loved and hated that the sound of Gilbert's teasing through the phone brought back the ache he *thought* he'd gotten rid of in the shower.

Memory aside, Matthew figured that Gilbert might be rushing back because he'd made the same mistake again. But clearly he hadn't, because his cane was right here at his feet.

He sat back up, frown deepening because he really had no idea what had Gilbert so worked up, and that uncertainty had him growing more worried by the second. That was when he heard footsteps approaching, boots against pavement, fast and heavy. Then came a tap at the window. Matthew quickly pressed the button at his side to roll it all the way down, squinting as chilly air hit his face. He was shielded slightly from the cold as Gilbert leaned inside.

"There's my little bird," he said through heavy breaths, and Matthew flushed, reaching out for Gilbert's face.

"Are you okay?" he asked again. He could feel Gilbert's skin grow taut beneath his palm; his trademark grin.

"I am now that I can give you this."

Matthew's brow crinkled as Gilbert placed something in his lap, and his hand left Gilbert's face to make sense of what he'd just been given. It was some kind of lidded container, plastic, cubed, very lightweight.

"I forgot to bring it with me to lunch, so I told myself I'd give it to you after school. And then I got so caught up with seeing Mr. K that I almost forgot again, like an idiot, until just now."

He sighed softly, starting to regain control of his breathing. “Didn’t mean to freak you out.”

Gilbert smiled as Matthew laughed and took the container into his hands, fingers running along its lid. “This couldn't wait until tomorrow?”

“Nope. Wouldn't be as good.”

“What is it?” he said through a smile. By now he'd already recognized that it was Tupperware, so he really wasn't asking what it was so much as what was inside it.

“I told you I was gonna make you my kettle corn, didn't I?” Gilbert couldn't keep his grin from widening as Matthew's face lit up.

And when he saw the light pink at Matthew's cheeks, felt the warmth in his own face, he knew that they were sharing the same thoughts. The same sweet memories.

That was all it took, the mere mention of popcorn, to bring the both of them back to the weekend they'd spent together, to all the time they'd spent bundled in blankets, to all the dumb jokes they'd made, all the silly stories they'd told each other. It brought back the warmth they'd shared, the comfort they'd found in the feeling of holding one another, in the feeling of knowing that within each other's hold, everything was okay. Would *be* okay.

They'd shared parts of themselves, unveiled their fears and uncertainties, their insecurities and past mistakes. They'd listened to each other, felt one another's pain, saw themselves in ways they never had before. Had become closer than they ever had before.

April was just around the corner, and yet in that moment, it didn't feel as if that much time had since passed, both feeling as if they were right back in that endless pile of pillows, holding each other like nothing else mattered.

Matthew shook the little container and laughed because sure enough, that was the rumbling of popcorn.

That weekend they'd been snowed in, Matthew had been a little bummed that the movie marathon he'd planned had become a bust. He'd mumbled into Gilbert's hair from inside their fort about all the popcorn he'd been ready to make, the super buttery, super unhealthy, artificially delicious kind that his Papa hated. Gilbert had just hummed along as he listened, enjoyed the cute huffing noises Matthew made when he insisted that he most definitely wasn't pouting like Gilbert said he was. To cheer him up, Gilbert told him that the marathon wasn't cancelled, but postponed, and that it was better that way because then he could make them popcorn that was *twice* as delicious and unhealthy.

Enter: Gilbert's “world famous” German chocolate kettle corn (famous because Gilbert said so, of course), now sitting in his lap. Gilbert *had* said he would make him some to try, hadn't he? Matthew had been both intrigued and skeptical of such a combo, and Gilbert promised he'd regret ever doubting his awesome taste buds. It was no different than caramel corn, he'd said, only better because chocolate. No, *German* chocolate. Matthew said he would believe it when he tried it himself. And now here it was, made special for him.

“Geez Gil,” said Matthew through another laugh. “When you called I thought—” He laughed again. “Well, I thought it was an emergency or something.”

“Well, it kind of was,” Gilbert said with a little shrug. “Day old popcorn is disgusting.”

“That’s...actually kinda true,” he chuckled.

“I rest my case,” he said, lips slanted into a smirk. “I know I'll never be as good a cook as your old man, but I think it turned out pretty damn good. Using semi-sweet chocolate's the secret, milk kinda overpowers the salty half.”

“*Semi*-sweet?” Matthew repeated. “This might just be the fanciest popcorn I'll ever eat.”

“I told you, Matt,” Gilbert said, teasing tone matching Matthew's. “World famous.”

Matthew was smiling as he leaned over and against the door, lips finding Gilbert's cheek. It left a lingering warmth at his skin even after he'd pulled away.

“Thank you. You’re really sweet, you know that?”

“Yeah, well.” Gilbert could only give a soft laugh. “You're the reason I'm...finally where I wanna be.”

“No, I'm not,” he said, “*You* are. You wouldn't be here if *you* hadn't wanted it as much as you did.”

“Yeah…” Gilbert said, rubbing at his neck. “But Christ, Dad and I are *talking* again.”

Gilbert couldn't help pausing after he'd said it, because he still honestly couldn't believe it. And yet it was true. Matthew smiled, remembering the way Gilbert had told him.

It had been an average Monday, two weeks after the snowstorm had passed. The weather had been just as average, skies gray, cold still unforgiving, old brown sludges of snow still clinging to the sidewalks. Matthew hadn't minded much, though, because that was just how Monday's were, dull and predictable; it was a fact of life. Until Gilbert decided to make it not so.

“Let's ditch the guys today,” he'd said from over Matthew's head. Matthew had been bent down, head in his locker, and Gilbert's voice had been a little muffled by hallway chatter, so Matthew thought he must've misheard when Gilbert finished with, “I was thinking we could have lunch in my car instead.”

Matthew had laughed and waved him away at first, assuming it to be a joke (because it was cold as hell outside, and why would they go outside to eat in the cold when the cafeteria was *right there*, and was Gilbert *really* going to stroll out to his car with his tatertots and chocolate milk?). But then Gilbert told him the car was already warm and that he'd brought a packed lunch today and *oh*, Matthew had quickly realized, he was serious.

So he'd zipped himself into his jacket and laughed some more as Gilbert took his hand and told him they were “breaking out of this joint.” And Matthew'd felt silly for how excited he

was for the change of venue. How eager he was to eat his lunch in a warm, cushioned seat, with no other conversations to talk over. With no one else but his ridiculous “we’ll call it a parking lot picnic” boyfriend.

But that's exactly what they did, curling up in the back seat of Gilbert's car, sharing bites of each other's food, and making the most of what little time they had before the next class period. That was where Gilbert told him, in the safe confines of that backseat.

“I talked to my dad last night,” he'd said suddenly. “Didn't hang up on him this time.”

Matthew had gasped softly, sat himself up from where his head lie in Gilbert's lap. “Wait…”

“Yeah.”

“You—Gil, you really…?”

“I did.” His voice had carried with it the grin he wore. “Thanks to you.”

It was a wonder how either of them stayed in one piece, what with how tightly they'd squeezed each other. Joy. Pure joy. It may as well have been powering the engine. It hummed through the both of them as Gilbert fell to the floor laughing with Matthew on top of him. Gilbert had hit the floor kind of hard and it’d been hilarious to see Matthew string together “sorry”s through his own laughter. He obviously hadn't been very sorry and Gilbert had shut him up with a kiss.

There hadn't been enough time for Gilbert to give a full rundown of how that first phone call had gone, what all was said, but it had been okay, because Gilbert promised to call him that same night and tell him every detail. And he had. And Matthew had been so happy to listen to him, Gilbert so happy to tell him, neither keeping track of the time as nine became ten, ten became eleven, and eleven became five till midnight.

And now here he was, a month later, now able to talk to his father without his hand going clammy around his phone. Now able to understand just how much he and his father had needed to hear each other's voices. Even if he'd tried to convince himself otherwise.

It wasn't as if everything was perfect now. In fact, nowadays he found his mind racing before bed more often than not, in a way it hadn't before he and his father reconnected. His mind would be a jumble of thoughts, grief and anxiety on some days, acceptance on others. And lately, embarrassment.

Yes, it embarrassed Gilbert to think of all the time he'd spent stewing in bitterness and frustration. It embarrassed the hell out of him. And it wasn't those feelings he was embarrassed by. No, he wasn't ashamed of feeling what he had, because those feelings were valid, and it’d felt good to let them fall free from his lips with his father listening on the other end, had felt good to hear the heartfelt apology he'd been longing for all this time.

It wasn't those feelings, but rather, how *long* he'd sat in those feelings. As if he was the only one in his family, on this planet, who'd known what it felt like to fake a smile. After what his father had told him about their grandfather last month, about the will he'd written, Gilbert had

a hard time comprehending how their father still fixed his lips to smile at all, fake or not. And yet he did it anyway, laughed at how loud Aster barked in the background, and at how his sons bickered with each other over speakerphone about who took the longest showers (the water bill had been abnormally high last month, and both blamed it on it being winter before blaming each other).

“You always go through at least three songs before you turn off the tap,” said Ludwig, “I’m sure your...creative singing makes you lose track of time.”

“Yeah, okay, Lud, just because you get up at the ass crack of dawn to shower doesn't mean I don't hear how long you're in there. You’re practically in there an hour!”

“Th-That's...clearly an exaggeration.”

“Alright, boys, just—” That was when he'd laughed, a warm, slightly tired sound. “I know the *both* of you are doing a bit of extra grooming for people other than yourself, but just be a little more mindful. Can we agree on that?”

“Ja, okay,” Gilbert mumbled.

“Understood,” Ludwig followed suit.

The two had been matching shades of red as they looked at each other and then away, neither having expected their old man, their “this pamphlet will explain it better than I can” old man, to make such a joke. They'd both had a good laugh about it after they'd ended the call.

No, things weren't suddenly perfect now. Their grandfather still had a shitty pair of lungs, their father was still on the other side of the world, and it would still be just he and Ludwig for some time more. But now, that void, that feeling of not knowing where the Beilschmidt family was going, of not knowing if things would ever return to the way the once were, was no more. Because now, those broken pieces were coming back together, and Gilbert couldn't wait to see what new memories they would make.

“It's…”

“Still kinda crazy, huh?” Matthew offered up, pleased when he heard Gilbert respond with another little laugh. Crazy. It was the same word he'd used to describe his disbelief to Matthew that day he'd first broke the news. Crazy, he'd said, but in a good way.

“Yeah,” said Gibert. “I was so damn stubborn and angry and the only reason I realized how *tired* I was of feeling like that is because you let me talk through it. And now...I'm at a place where I can actually talk about my fuck-ups instead of acting like they never happened. Without you, I...who knows where the fuck I'd be right now.”

“And *you* let me listen, Gil. Don't forget that,” Matthew said softly, and Gilbert took his hand, hoping Matthew didn't mind how much colder it was than his own. The little smile on his face told him that he didn't. Not one bit. “I know I already told you this when you slept over at mine, but it really means a lot to me. Being someone you can talk to about anything. Good and bad.”

“Yeah,” he said, breaking into a smile. “Speaking of good…”

“Mmhm?”

“I, uh…”

“Uh-huh?” he prodded again, only to be answered with laughter. He couldn't help laughing too. “Gilbert, what is it?”

“Fuck, okay, so this is gonna sound really weird, and if you're not comfortable with it, just say the word and I'll drop the idea enitrely.”

“Okay,” Matthew laughed again, the excitement in Gilbert's voice contagious. “So, what is it then?”

“Well, remember when I told you that Dad was really looking forward to meeting you?”

“Yeah…” Matthew blushed, something Gilbert had said last week resurfacing in his mind.

Shit, Matt, I talk about you so much that Dad's practically already met you.

And then he gasped, heart missing a beat when he realized where Gilbert might be going with this. And if Matthew had guessed right, he had a lot of internal freaking out to do. “Is he flying back earlier than he planned?”

Gilbert shook his head, though he couldn't help the way his face grew warm when he thought of his father and Matthew finally meeting in person.

Ever since he and his father began talking again, he'd found himself daydreaming at all hours of the day—in the middle of class, on the car ride home, in the shower, before bed—about what that day would be like, what they would have for dinner, what it would feel like to have Matthew sitting there next to him at the Beilschmidt dinner table, what they might talk about together. And he fantasized about that day, endlessly, shamelessly, because he finally *could*. Because his father had finally booked a flight back home. Home. And Aster's brother and sister were coming home too. 2:10 AM, Thursday, July 10th. The exact moment the plane would hit the runway. He had a *date* now. And until then, he would keep playing those scenes over and over in his head, his own private showing of a life he'd never known could be so close in coming.

“No,” he said, “but the last time we talked I realized that...I could make it so that you’ll meet Dad a lot earlier than July. If you wanted to, I mean.”

Matthew furrowed his brow. “What do you mean?”

“Well, remember how I first met your pops?”

Matthew's frown deepened for the slightest moment before it hit him. “Oh my God,” he said. “Skype.”

“Yeah,” Gilbert chuckled again. “So, Aster always goes all crazy when she hears Blackie and Berlitz barking in the background on Dad's end, and they freak out too, so I made a joke that we should break open Skype for an early reunion. And then Lud overheard me and now it's not a joke anymore. You know Aster is practically his kid. Anyway,” he said, hurrying to the point as Matthew laughed softly. “I thought, shit, if we're gonna pull out the webcams for the dogs, who says my dad and boyfriend can't meet too?”

“I…” Matthew spoke after a slight pause. “Does your dad...Does he know I would be there?”

“He knows.” Gilbert cleared his throat, sheepish. “When I got the idea about having you there I kinda just blurted it out to him. I really should've asked you first and I'm sorry about that. But, uh...he said he hoped you wouldn't mind all the barking. And that he'd love to see what you're like when you aren't frozen in time.”

"Is...is that a dad joke?"

Gilbert snorted. "It sounded way worse in German."

Matthew laughed and his face grew even warmer as he thought of what he must have looked like in the pictures Gilbert sent to his father, if his hair had looked frizzy in those spontaneous selfies, what his face must've looked like as Gilbert pressed a kiss to his cheek without warning. Gilbert's father had seen him, heard all about him, and now…they were going to have a chance to talk to each other. Gilbert's dad really *did* want to meet him, even if it wouldn't actually be in person. It had Matthew's heart racing, but...in a good way.

Gilbert took Matthew's silence for hesitation, noticed his steadily flushed face, and suddenly felt guilty for springing this on Matthew so suddenly. “If you need some time to think about it, o-or if you're not comfortable with it—”

“Yes!”

“W-Wait, really?” Gilbert broke into another grin as Matthew's hand squeezed his.

“Yes, let's do it. I've wanted to meet him...for a really long time.”

“Okay," Gilbert said. "This is...this is actually happening.”

“Yeah,” Matthew said through a grin. “Yeah, it is. I'll get to meet your dad *and* be there when Aster sees her brother and sister? I mean, how could I miss a day like that?”

“Shall we set a date then?”

Matthew nodded and hummed, chest buzzing with excitement. “Let's.”

“*Liebling*,” said Gilbert, exceedingly dramatic, exceedingly Gilbert. “would you be free the Saturday after next? For this doggie date with my dad?”

“God,” Matthew laughed. “Very. Just tell me a time and I'll be there.” He made another amused noise when Gilbert kissed the back of his hand.

“Awesome. I'll let you know as soon as I do.”

“Okay, sounds good.”

A few moments passed as they just smiled stupidly at each other, Gilbert standing there contentedly like he hadn't been leaning into a car for the past ten minutes, and Matthew sitting there like Ivan wouldn't be coming back to drive them out of here any minute now. The thought of Ivan coming back from seeing Alfred made him gasp as he remembered that Gilbert had been in the middle of meeting someone too.

“What?” Gilbert asked.

“Gil, what happened to meeting with your teacher? I hope you didn't stop the meeting short to come and give me this,” he said, holding up the container of popcorn in his lap.

Gilbert laughed, shook his head. “No, I haven't seen him yet, I was still on my way to his class when I remembered.” He gave the slightest sigh. “I know there's no real reason for me to be nervous...I mean, Mr. K’s the most laid-back back teacher I know, but still. I just wanna do this right.”

“It’ll go just fine. I’m sure he'll just be glad to catch up, you know?”

“Yeah…”

“It will,” Matthew said again, leaning forward, smiling when Gilbert's forehead pressed to his, when the palm of Gilbert's hand caressed his cheek.

“I'm...sorry I've been so out of it today.”

Forgetting to bring Matthew's snack to lunch hadn't been Gilbert's only slip up of the day. He'd been so preoccupied with his own thoughts all day that he accidentally grabbed Matthew's world geography textbook from Matthew's locker instead of his own, and so while Matthew had been without his book second period (snickering as he wondered what Gilbert’s face must've looked like staring at pages full of braille), Gilbert found himself facepalming at his desk, groaning out a quiet apology to his boyfriend from three halls over.

But no, that hadn't been the end of it. He'd also missed the announcement over the intercom about that day's general assembly while zoning out in the bathroom, which meant that instead of heading back to class, he should have gone straight to meet with Matthew, like they always did before any type of assembly. It also meant that by the time he'd pushed through crowds of students to get to Matthew's locker, Matthew had already been dragged off by Feliciano. They found each other in the auditorium afterwards, Matthew waving away his apology and patting at the seat he'd saved for Gilbert.

And as if Gilbert hadn't made enough of an ass of himself with everything else, apparently he needed to be reminded that his car wouldn't just magically unlock without a key. That's right, he nearly forgot his *car keys*, and the only reason he hadn't was because Matthew had grabbed them from the little hook inside his locker, jingling them and smirking as he asked Gilbert how he was going to get into his car if he had no way to open it.

His midday trip to the parking lot had been for Matthew of course; he had groaned at the tail-end of lunch about forgetting his chapstick at home, about how dry his lips felt, and Gilbert always kept some in his glove compartment, so of course he was going to go get it, no matter how many times Matthew told him he didn't have to. It could have been a real smooth, real awesome display of Gilbert's chivalry, but his spacy mind had to go and fuck it up. Matthew had still been laughing at him when he returned with the little tube, and he'd kissed away the pout on Gilbert's face, lips tasting of black cherry.

“It's okay, Gil,” said Matthew. “I know what this meeting is for you. Don't apologize.” His hand settled over Gilbert's. “I promise it'll go well. You've got this. I know you do.”

His hand left Gilbert's own to cup his face, run fingers through his pale-colored hair. He smiled as he realized Gilbert wasn't wearing a beanie. The weather was getting warmer, however slowly, and soon enough winter would become spring. Matthew could feel it, the coming of the new season, of bright new beginnings, of more experiences to be had and memories to be made. He could feel it, and he knew Gilbert felt it too. But he also knew how scary change could be, knew why Gilbert's mind had been racing all day.

Matthew understood now more than ever just how much it had taken for Gilbert to be where he was right now, knew just how many parts of himself Gilbert had felt he'd had to hide, not just from Matthew but from his own subconscious. He understood the loneliness Gilbert had felt long before they'd met, the anxiety he was feeling now, because Matthew was no stranger to either.

Before meeting Gilbert, meeting his now close friends, Matthew had felt lost too, and he still remembered how anxious he felt as he noticed the world around him changing, remembered how he used look over his shoulder at the darkness he'd been pulled from, as if at any moment it might come to reclaim him from the light he'd found. But now, that anxious feeling, that feeling that things would go back to the way they used to be, was gone, and Matthew would never look back again.

In Gilbert, Matthew saw himself, and what he wanted more than anything was for Gilbert to know that there was nothing but good things in store for him. When spring came and flowers broke free from the once cold, hard earth, stretching up towards the limitless sky, Gilbert would blossom right along with them.

Matthew wanted him to know that there was no need to look back.

“I know you do,” Matthew said again, and he heard Gilbert sigh, the sound content.

“Hell yeah I do,” he said, and the grin it brought to Matthew's face was almost too much for Gilbert to handle.

When they kissed, both immediately knew that they shouldn't have, because they both had places they needed to be, and yet a single kiss just wasn't enough to satisfy either of them. It would be nothing for Gilbert to part his lips just a little more, for Matthew to find his tongue, for them to lose themselves in the familiarity of each other. But they couldn't, wouldn't, not right now. And yet Gilbert hoped that with that single kiss, Matthew knew just how thankful he was to have him at his side.

“Sorry,” Gilbert whispered against his lips as he pulled back. “I’ve gotta go.”

Matthew shook his head. “Thanks for this,” he said, hand settling on the container in his lap. “I'm excited to try it.” His cheeks colored lightly. “And to meet your dad.”

“Me too, *Vögelchen*.”

“And don't worry, I'll let you know before the day's up if your dish is worthy of such worldwide acclaim.”

Wiping that smirk away from Matthew's faintly cherry flavored lips was tempting, but Gilbert restrained himself. “Yeah, well, just don't share it with your pop. I've lasted this long without being the disappointing boyfriend, and I'm not gonna start today.”

Matthew laughed again. “But what if he loves it? Do you really wanna pass up the chance to become Papa’s *favorite* of his son's boyfriends?”

Gilbert scoffed. “Yeah, right. You know I already am.”

“Do I?”

“Let me try and convince you.”

Matthew gasped as Gilbert reached further into the car. “Gil!” Matthew laughed, quickly trapped his hands, and pushed him back outside. “Didn't you say you were going?” he huffed, smiling despite himself. “Go!”

“I like it when you order me around like that, you know.”

“Gilbert, I swear to God.”

Gilbert cackled, hand on the roof of Ivan's car as he leaned inside to place one more quick kiss on Matthew's cheek. “Tell Mother Goose I said hello, okay?”

“Okay.”

Gilbert started walking back towards the school building, backwards, and though he knew it was a lot more practical to walk so that he could actually see where he was going, he justified his actions as he saw Matthew smiling through Ivan's front windshield. “And let me know when you're home!” he called out.

“I will!” Matthew called back through the open window. His smile lingered as he rolled the window back up, settling back into his seat with a happy sigh.

It was only about twenty seconds later that the driver's side door opened and it startled Matthew a little, mind too preoccupied with thoughts of Gilbert to have heard Ivan's approaching footsteps.

“I am sorry for taking so long,” Ivan said as he ducked inside, closing the door.

Matthew shook his head. “It really wasn't,” he said, listening to the jingle of Ivan's keys as he stuck them into the ignition.

Ivan secured his seatbelt, looking over at Matthew to make sure his was on too. It was, though Ivan’s attention was soon drawn to what Matthew held in his hands, a clear green container that hadn't been there when Ivan left. He smiled as he turned the key, engine rumbling to life.

“Popcorn?” he asked, looking over his shoulder as he backed out of his space. He heard Matthew laugh softly as he shifted into drive, turning back around in time to see Matthew sporting a little grin.

“Yeah,” he said. “Gil ran it out here to me like the world was ending.”

Ivan gave a small smile. He'd caught sight of Gilbert leaving the parking lot as he was coming in, though Gilbert had been too far away to see him.

“It looks quite brown,” he said, “Is it a special flavor?”

“German chocolate kettle corn.” Matthew popped open the lid, smiling when he caught a strong whiff of chocolate, salt, and sugar. He had a feeling it would be sticky, as kettle corn tended to be, so he closed the top back, deciding he would eat it when he wasn't at risk of dirtying Ivan's car. “I can't even imagine how messy making this must have been.”

Ivan's brows rose. “He made it himself? That is quite thoughtful of him,” he said.

“Yeah…it is.”

Ivan noticed the color on Matthew's face and had to resist chuckling. Whenever he saw Matthew so smitten with Gilbert or the other way around, he couldn't help but think back to the New Year's party, how clearly anxious Matthew had been, how when the next time he saw Matthew, he was with Gilbert in front of that abnormally large tree, their hands linked, looking sheepish and yet happy as they spoke at each other's ears over the buzzing of so many other conversations. As all of them had anticipated, of course.

And yet even though Ivan had known it would happen, he still found himself taken aback by Gilbert in particular, how gingerly he'd held Matthew's hand as they moved outside, how softly he'd spoken at Matthew's ear, how exaggeratedly careful and timid his movements had been as he slipped an arm around Matthew's waist, like a child cradling a baby bird in its chubby little hands.

“God, Gil, he's not gonna break, I promise,” Alfred had said from the terrace that night, laughing and shaking his head. He and Ivan had found a perfect little corner where they could keep each other warm and people-watch at the same time, and they had a clear view of those mingling under the moonlight on the lush green lawn down below. It was half past midnight, and by then everyone had split off to share the first beginnings of the new year with their respective dates, including Matthew and Gilbert.

They'd spotted the two from overhead, strolling along the immaculately kept lawn, and Ivan couldn't stop himself from smiling as Alfred added his own commentary.

“It is one thing to look at a pretty jewel from behind the glass display, but it is another to finally hold it between your hands. I imagine Gilbert feels a lot like that.”

Alfred blushed as Ivan's arms tightened around him from behind. “I was really wrong about him,” he said after a pause.

“I was no better…” Ivan watched as they stopped to admire a few rose bushes, their hands never parting even as Matthew leaned down to presumably capture its scent. “I would have never known he was capable of being so...selfless.”

Alfred laughed against him. “Pretty tame way of saying he wasn't the ass you thought he was.”

Ivan had shrugged. “Sure, if you'd prefer to phrase it more frankly.”

It was true though, Ivan's impression of Gilbert hadn't been all that great, because as a freshman Ivan had only ever seen him in less than impressive circumstances, drumming at his desk with pencils he should've been writing with, more preoccupied with getting laughs from the class than answering questions from the teacher, dozing off only to be woken by the class's reactions to his snoring. Yes, Gilbert was rather obnoxious, and Ivan had never really seen him as anything more than as a class clown. And yet annoying as he often was, Ivan had never held any real sort of contempt for him; it was more so indifference. Gilbert Beilschmidt was a guy who lived for trouble making, and Ivan had never seen him as anything more. Until he saw Gilbert around Matthew.

He'd first noticed it that day in the library, when he'd had to drag Alfred away lest he continue his unsettling stalking. He hadn't been able to tell what Matthew and Gilbert were saying to each other, but he'd most definitely noticed something he'd never seen before. Gilbert was smiling. It wasn't a cheeky grin or a smirk, but a genuine smile as Matthew spoke to him.

Up until that moment, he'd never seen Gilbert wearing an expression that wasn't something brimming with his own self-satisfaction, and it was interesting. But still, he told Alfred what little he knew about him, hoping that it would ease Alfred's worries. Yes, he was quite the character, he'd said as they made for the parking lot, but from what Ivan had seen the previous year, he was rather harmless.

As the school year progressed, and as Ivan went from not seeing Gilbert at all, to seeing him at Matthew's side everyday, it became more and more apparent to Ivan that Gilbert Beilschmidt was not as one dimensional as he appeared to be their freshman year. Of course Ivan could not have truly known who Gilbert was as a person from sharing a sixty minute class with him, but to see the way he was when he was with Matthew was actually astonishing. When Matthew laughed at Gilbert's childish jokes, Gilbert often looked genuinely, almost sheepishly pleased, his face often times changing hue. It was so unlike the smug smile he would flash when his classmates erupted into laughter.

Whenever Matthew spoke, Gilbert listened intently, not just with his ears but with his whole person. His eyes left Matthew not once, his body was often leaned forward with interest, and to Ivan, it was strange to see him in that position, to for once see him be the one listening and not talking, like he so often used to do in the middle of lessons. And Ivan continued to notice these different sides of Gilbert, the parts of his personality that he didn't play up for laughs.

It was obvious that Gilbert had been developing feelings for Matthew, but even outside of his apparent infatuation, Ivan could see that this side of Gilbert, this less abrasive, unexpectedly considerate side of Gilbert, wasn't something he showed solely to Matthew. It was simply the way he was around the people he cared about.

By now, Ivan realized just how much more there was to Gilbert Beilschmidt, and he probably wouldn't have ever realized it had he and Matthew not befriended and fallen for each other. Matthew had become something of a younger brother in Ivan's eyes, and so when he became friendly with Gilbert, Ivan had to exchange his indifference for cordiality.

This meant spending the next few weeks being introduced to extensions of this new friendship, to Gilbert's brother, to his childhood friends. It meant becoming accustomed to Feliciano's propensity for squealing when he was excited. It meant unintentionally learning how to insult someone's mother in Italian, in more ways than one, courtesy of Lovino. It meant no longer being surprised when Antonio managed to calm Lovino down, like some kind of angry-Italian whisperer. It also meant watching Ludwig turn into a proud father as he talked about his dog, which really, Ivan could understand; he had a soft spot for animals too.

And so, as Ivan was thrust into this new friends circle, he continued to realize how wrong he'd been about this boy who he'd written off as a mere trouble maker. Gilbert cared deeply for his friends, despite their frequent bickering and teasing, and it was clear that he cherished his role as Ludwig's older brother, even if it sometimes appeared that Ludwig was the elder of the two.

In those few months, Ivan realized that Alfred, that *both* he and Alfred, had nothing to worry about where Matthew was concerned. Yes, the day Ivan had handed Gilbert Alfred's note, the day Alfred had sat down with him, face to face, man to man, he'd had their blessing.

He looked over again at Matthew to find him still blushing, though he had turned slightly towards the window, perhaps to conceal it. Oh, young love, Ivan thought, how precious it was.

“So,” Matthew said again, face warm as Ivan turned out onto the road, “how did it go with Al?” he asked, changing the subject so that he could give his poor cheeks a rest.

Matthew could hear the smile in Ivan's voice as he replied, “Just fine. It seems I should not have worried as much as I did.”

With Matthew sitting in on his shifts at his family's shop recently, Ivan had begun to share with Matthew his worries about being less involved in sports due to work, told him about the stress he felt he was causing Alfred by not being there. Matthew had told him that he was sure Alfred didn't see it that way at all, but ultimately suggested Ivan just talk to Alfred after when they were alone, let Alfred know how he was feeling.

“Toldja,” Matthew said, nudging at Ivan's shoulder. “Al freaking worships you. I knew he wouldn't have minded one bit.”

It was now Ivan's turn to blush, switching on his blinker before he turned another corner. “I do not think I would go as far as to say that,” he said, “but...I am happy to have someone who understands me as Fredka does.”

Oh, young love, Ivan thought, how foolish he was to think it hadn't claimed him too.

Mr. Karpusi didn't actually know that Gilbert was coming to see him. But Gilbert somehow preferred it that way. This way, he could avoid the extra pressure of an actual set meeting, avoid feeling like he had a time limit on what he wanted to say. Because he did indeed have a lot he wanted to say, things he'd always wanted to, but had never had the chance to.

Gilbert readjusted the backpack slung over his shoulder as he walked down the empty hall, Matthew's encouraging words still in his mind. And he smiled, thinking of the grin on Matthew's face as he left the parking lot, how much he loved it. Him. He felt like a fool for how long he'd waited to tell Matthew the truth, his truth. He'd been scared, of what Matthew would think, of what he might say. Too afraid to create even the slightest possibility of a world where Matthew knew just how flawed he was.

But then, that day, Matthew had asked him what was wrong, if everything was okay, and the way his voice had sounded, so full of concern, had been so comforting. And before he knew it, everything was coming out. Everything. He hadn't been able to stop because the more he spoke, and the more Matthew listened, held him close, the more relieved he felt.

Why stop at his father? He'd thought, why not his mother too, how fucked up that whole relationship had been? Why not his shit middle school years, all the times he'd come home to press a bag of frozen peas against his swollen face? The flunking grades, the detentions, the suspensions, the way he'd isolated himself from his friends and even his own brother—he told Matthew about it all, and felt like a stronger person because of it. Felt stronger with yet another person in his life there to support him. Where *would* he be right now, if he and Matthew had never shared a homeroom? It was something Gilbert thought about a lot, probably way more than he should have, and he was trying to be better about leaving those what-if's behind. He was happy, happier than he'd been in a long time, and he would keep moving forward, not back.

He came to a stop at the end of the hall, staring at his old biology teacher's open door. He took another step, peered inside. Sure enough, Mr. Karpusi was there at his desk, too focused on whatever he was writing to notice Gilbert standing in the doorway.

Finally, Gilbert thought, a chance to right his mistakes, show his gratitude. Mr. Karpusi wasn't the last person on his list of People He Owed His Fucking Sanity. In fact, there were still three more people who'd yet to hear how much they'd kept Gilbert from sinking. But Gilbert was going to focus on one thing at a time. He wouldn't rush this.

Coming here today had been long overdue, Gilbert knew it, and he was ashamed that it had taken him this long to do so. And perhaps it had taken him this long because he knew a mere “sorry” wouldn't be enough. But that didn't matter now, because he was here. Matthew had

given him the final push he needed, and he was here. He took in a breath, exhaled, and knocked lightly on the open door.

When he looked up and their eyes met, Gilbert grinned. “Miss me much?”

“Gilbert,” he responded, a friendly smile on his face. “It's good to see you.”

“Got a minute?”

“Of course, come in,” Mr. Karpusi said, waving him inside. “I can't exactly start the review until a student decides to show, so I've got nothing but time.”

Gilbert chuckled as he walked into the classroom, looking around at all the empty desks. Now distracted by Gilbert, Mr. Karpusi took the opportunity to wheel back in his chair and stretch, even letting out a little yawn into his hand. “Guess no one wanted to take advantage of your office hours today, huh? You’d think people would come with midterms in a week.”

Mr. Karpusi hummed, smiled knowingly. “They’ll all come to the very last review session. And ask me what to expect on the test, even though we've been doing the same problems for weeks. They always do.”

“Yeah, we're kinda dumb like that, aren't we?” Gilbert said, shaking his head as he looked around the classroom, noticing the little changes that had been made.

There were new posters on the wall, and the bulletin board at the back of the room was decorated differently than what he remembered, but of course it was, he wasn't a freshman anymore, and this was no longer his classroom. And Mr. Karpusi was no longer his biology teacher.

It was nostalgic, to be back in this classroom, even if it had only been a year. And he couldn't help but think of how such little changes made the room look so different. He wondered if he looked different in this man's eyes, after all this time. If he looked as different as he felt.

He turned back around to face the man seated behind his desk, raking a hand through his hair. “And you know how damn stubborn *I* was.”

The teacher laughed, leaned back in his chair. “You came around eventually.”

“Yeah,” Gilbert laughed softly, thought back to his time spent in this classroom, how many assignments he'd half-assed and tests he flunked just because he'd been too lazy to take notes. “Thanks to you.” He grinned, scratched at his nose. “Would you believe me if I told you I haven't missed a single day this year?”

“I would,” he said. “I haven't seen you on the ground floor all year, Gilbert. Excluding that first day, of course,” he said, pulling out one of the drawers under his desk. “I was hoping the next time I saw you, it wouldn't be in detention. So this is a welcome surprise.”

Gilbert stumbled backward as the teacher tossed something tiny his way, a flash of red, and caught it between his hands. It was a Kit-Kat bar.

“No one is coming for the review today,” he said matter-of-factly, and began to unwrap a Kit-Kat of his own. “Make yourself comfortable.”

Gilbert smiled and slipped off his back pack, lowering it to the floor before he seated himself cross-legged atop one of the desks at the front. He laughed as he looked down at the chocolate bar in his hand. “So even your junk food’s cat themed, huh?” he snorted, ripping open the plastic.

Mr. Karpusi shrugged. Like there wasn't a coffee mug on his desk that read “Hello, Meow Are You?” Like the pencil he'd put down when Gilbert walked in didn't have a cat's head as its eraser. Like the tissue box on his desk wasn't covered in little paw prints. “Coincidence,” he said, though there was a hint of amusement in his cool green eyes.

“Yeah, sure,” Gilbert said, snapping off a bar and munching on it.

“When I noticed you weren't showing up anymore, I admit, I got a little concerned. But then I saw you around the halls with your friends.”

“Yeah.” Gilbert rubbed sheepishly at his neck, remembering the few times they'd happened to pass one another in the halls this year, sending each other little head nods. “I, uh...sorry I kinda fell off the map.”

Mr. Karpusi paused in the middle of taking his second bite. “You're apologizing for *not* getting detention?”

Gilbert snickered. “Well, you know what I mean. Kinda weird to go from seeing each other every other day to only in passing.”

It was comforting in a way, those days Gilbert trudged down to the ground floor to find that his biology teacher was the one overseeing detention that day. And he was assigned detention duty more often than he wasn't, probably because the administration noticed how well students responded to him (because he wasn't a fucking power-hungry tyrant like the other old sacks of dirt teaching at the school).

“It’s better this way. You were my student, yes, and I always enjoy seeing students of mine. But not down there. I never actually enjoyed seeing you walk through that door, Gilbert.”

“I know,” Gilbert said, glancing away, shrinking into himself a bit when he heard the slight disappointment in his voice.

“But,” he said after a pause, “I knew I'd rather it be me than Mr. Stewart or Mrs. Jameson. I think those two find genuine pleasure in kids’ pain,” he said, shaking his head as he crumpled up his wrapper and tossed it into the bin next to desk.

Gilbert scoffed, remembering all the essays he'd been forced to write by the balding reincarnation of Nosferatu, and all the times he hadn't even been able to yawn without being violently shushed by the old hag. “That's an understatement.” He tossed his own wrapper, three-pointer style, shouting a little victory under his breath as it went inside.

“That aside, I really am glad to see you're doing well. The times I have seen you just in passing, you've seemed happy to be here. At school.”

“Yeah,” Gilbert said, “I guess...a lot's changed since then.”

See, the thing was, Gilbert used to be a pretty shit student, and there was no denying it.

Sure, this year, he'd improved a lot, had maintained his B average, had missed not a single school day, nor a single lesson, even if he did find his eyelids drooping during subjects he wasn't particularly interested in. Yeah, he'd done pretty well for himself, and he was going to celebrate those victories, made possible by the support he'd found in the people he cared about most.

Gilbert knew he would never be the kind of student his brother was, would never take pages and pages of meticulous notes, or treat extra credit assignments like stepping stones instead of lifeboats. No, Gilbert would never be as academically gifted as his brother, and he was okay with that. He was okay, no, content, with watching Ludwig proudly from the sidelines instead of struggling to keep pace with him on the track. He wasn't the perfect student, sure, but he'd come a hell of a long way.

Because, again, there were no if's, and's, or but's about it, he used to be the very antithesis of what it meant to be a “good” student, no matter how much it embarrassed him to think about. And even more embarrassing was the fact he couldn’t even genuinely use the phrase “used to” as if the class-cutting and detention slips and mouthing off to his teachers were now in some distant, hazy part of his memory. Because they weren't. Not even close. His relationship with Mr. Karpusi was proof of that.

The memories of himself, of the person he once was, were still very fresh in his mind. Junior high. Sitting in the principal's office wiping blood from his swollen lip. Snatching up tests covered in red ink and grimacing as he was told to stay after class. Turning his phone off just so he could avoid all the texts from his friends, asking him if they could come over, if he wanted to come grab a bite to eat. Trying their hardest to help save him from himself. He didn't like to think about those days, but the memories always resurfaced when he least wanted them to.

His friends knocking at his front door.

His irritation when Ludwig let them inside despite his protest.

His shame as he was dragged down stairs, Lovino pulling at his left arm, Feli gripping at his right, Toni shoving at his back.

And his terror at realizing that as he squirmed on the living room couch under the pitiful gazes of his friends, of his brother, that he hadn't eaten anything in the past two days, had been wearing the same clothes for the past three.

And that *neither* of those was normal.

They were wounds that had never properly healed, ones he'd slapped bandaids on in hopes that if he covered them up, they'd one day go away. Had he known they would follow him for so long, he wouldn't have been so careless in his haste to forget.

It had started in seventh grade. And it wasn't as if it had been some dramatic, life-altering event that had made Gilbert's B's become C's and his C's become F's. No, instead, it had been a combination of things, a slow, steady tearing at the seams.

It was his father's increasing absence.

It was the sense of sadness he felt when he came home to his house with one excited dog instead of three.

It was the disappointment he felt coming home to his father's car in the driveway, not because he was actually home, but because he was on the other side of the world, and had no use for it.

It was the frustration that came with listening to his father's scolding over dinner, about his failing grades, about the calls from his school.

It was realizing that not only was he a poor example to his brother, but also a disappointment to his father.

And it was the anger he felt when he was caught between wanting to straighten up and win his father's praise, or throw himself into more trouble just to spite him.

The kids who hissed at him in the halls and called him “demon boy” were just the shitty icing on top of an even shittier cake, and although Gilbert wasn't particularly proud of how easily they'd managed to get under his skin, he would be lying if he said that it hadn't felt good to swing the punches he had.

Thankfully, the taunting hadn't followed him into his freshman year, although by then Gilbert had learned to take the comments and stares in stride. High schoolers were apparently more concerned with who was sleeping with who and when they could next get shitfaced rather than some newbie freshman kid with albinism. It was a nice change. High school had been a nice change.

And yet, still Gilbert struggled with his grades, with his attention in class. He didn't skip school anymore, and thanks to endless nagging from Ludwig and his friends, he'd dropped his habit of cutting classes (although he then formed a new habit of arriving a few minutes late).

All of the pent up aggression he'd had throughout junior high was promptly replaced with apathy. Sometimes he'd spend most of the class period staring out the window, other times he would give a bogus answer to the teacher, make some smart comment that would get him a chorus of laughter and a detention slip. Always a packaged deal. If as soon as he arrived home all he was going to think about was the fact that his father cared more about his work than him, then of course he was going to get his laughs in at school. Before he returned home and was reminded of just how hollow he really felt.

Back then, seeing the way Gilbert had struggled in class, Mr. Karpusi would often encourage Gilbert to come to his office hours after school for help. But Gilbert had always refused with a terse “thanks but no thanks,” or “yeah, I think I'm good,” or some other snarky variation of the sort before slinging his backpack over his shoulder and heading for the door.

But then Mr. Karpusi pulled him aside after class some weeks before midterms, told him that if he scored as poorly on the next two exams as he did on the first, the chances of him passing the class was slim to none. And from then on, Gilbert had no choice but to come after school for his help. Because even though he hadn't been doing so hot in his other classes, at least he wasn't at risk of failing them. Though looking back, if Mr. Karpusi hadn't pulled him aside when he had, he probably would have started failing those too.

So he stayed after school every Monday and Thursday, in this same classroom, hunched over his desk and glaring at the stupid little cat calendar on his teacher's desk while he reviewed the differences between recessive genes and dominant genes, and yapped on about plant cells versus animal cells. Yeah, Gilbert hadn't really wanted to be there.

It wasn't that he disliked Mr. Karpusi as a person, more so just the fact that he was a teacher, that he was a part of this mind-numbing experience called high school, and that he'd rather not be around any extension of that experience any more than he needed to be. It was the same reason why he hadn't joined any extracurriculars like his friends, like the twins with their artsy stuff and Antonio with his choir stuff. Staying after school? *Willingly*? No, Gilbert had never understood it. He was only in this classroom after hours because he didn't want to flunk out.

But slowly...Gilbert had warmed up to him. Between categorizing fauna and flora, he learned that Mr. Karpusi had two cats named Greece and Turkey, and that Turkey was very pregnant. As Gilbert labeled the mitochondria and cell wall on the whiteboard some weeks later, he couldn't help but ask how many kittens they'd had, because he knew Mr. Karpusi could resist talking about his “babies.” He hadn't been able to stop cackling when Mr. Karpusi told him how his husband had cried when delivering them.

Some days Gilbert would come in in a particularly sour mood, almost as if he'd reverted back to the snarky kid who wouldn't see reason. But then Mr. Karpusi would pause the session, ask him if he wanted to talk about it. At first, it was always a mumble of “no.” Then it was shakes of the head, then sighs.

And then, one day... “It's my fucking Dad, okay?”

Mr. Karpusi was the only adult at this school who knew about Gilbert's home life, the only teacher who'd thought to ask. The only teacher who hadn't given him a detention slip when he mouthed off or fell asleep in class. The only teacher who'd never sent him a dirty glare when he came through the door late.

He was the only one, and Gilbert's fear that he might slip word to the other teachers, that he might be forced to go to the school's guidance counselor, kept him from saying anything for most of the year. He didn't want that hack of a lady prying into his business, handing him cheesy brochures. He didn't want to give teachers the satisfaction of gossiping about him in

the teacher's lounge, about how it was no wonder he was a shitty student. And he didn't want to be pitied when all he came to this classroom to do was not fucking fail.

But the day Gilbert had finally let it be said, was the day he'd fully put his trust in his teacher, and it had felt good to finally tell someone. And Mr. Karpusi didn't ask him bullshit questions like, “How does that make you feel?” or “Why do you think you this happened?” He simply let Gilbert vent, handed Gilbert his (admittedly) adorable little paw-printed tissue box and let him make fun of it while he pushed it away in lieu of his sleeve.

It was why Gilbert was here today. Mr. Karpusi had done so much for him last year, put up with a lot of his shit, and Gilbert had never properly thanked him for it.

“Yeah,” he said, “things are better and I...I just wanted to drop by say thanks...and sorry. Really. I used to be a real smartass, and you were only trying to help.”

“It's alright, Gilbert.” Mr. Karpusi chuckled again. “You don't become a high school teacher without having thick skin. I've heard students call teachers every insult under the sun, and I've heard of all the little things you all scribble into the bathroom stalls about each other. Knowing the latter, I'd say us teachers have it easy.”

“Well, when you put it like that…” Gilbert snorted. “But seriously, Mr. K. Thank you. I've kinda been putting this off for a while, because I hate thinking about the way I was last year, and for a long time, I didn't really know how to say what I wanted to say. You did a lot for me last year, and I really appreciate it.”

Mr. Karpusi took in this image of his former student from where he sat at his desk, the shy little grin on his face. This was a young man who'd found purpose, who was no longer wandering aimlessly through life, but instead enjoying it. He could see the fire in those wild red eyes, an eagerness and determination that he'd never had a chance to see so clearly before today. And it had him smiling too.

“You're welcome. I'm happy I could help.”

“Oh, here,” Gilbert said quickly, reaching for his backpack and pulling it into his lap. He unzipped it and reached inside. It was Mr. Karpusi's turn to intercept as Gilbert tossed something his way. “I saw it at the gas station the other day and thought you could find a place for it in your collection. It runs on solar, so you just have to place it near a window or something if you wanna see it move.”

He looked down at the item in his hands, a little desk accessory encased in plastic. It was a chubby white cat that held out a its paws with a grin on its face. According to the packaging, its disproportionately and adorably large head would sway from side to side when the toy was exposed to sunlight.

Gilbert laughed out loud when the man broke into a wide grin, something Gilbert had never seen him do before. “I'm guessing you *don't* already have one of these then.”

“As your teacher…” he said, words coming out a bit slower than they should because he was too busy reading about how to set the thing up. All he had to do see its cute little head bob

was set it next to a window? Where were his scissors? He had to get this thing open. “This would be highly inappropriate for me to accept.”

“Yeah,” Gilbert said, uncrossing his legs and getting to his feet. He couldn't help snorting again, because it was so obvious that the man had no intention of giving it back. “Good thing you technically aren't anymore then, huh?”

“Great thing,” he answered, and Gilbert laughed once more. “Thank you.” He watched as Gilbert threw his backpack over his shoulder and began heading for the door.

“Thanks for letting me drop in,” he said. “And not just this time, either.” He stopped as his teacher called his name, looked over his shoulder. Mr. Karpusi wore a small smile. But there was something about it. Something…knowing.

“You and your *friend* have gotten quite close, haven't you?” he said. “Matthew, was it?”

And immediately Gilbert grew pink. Yeah, Mr. Karpusi had definitely seen them in the halls more than once, hand in hand, and he'd blushed those few times they'd made eye contact. “Yeah,” he said. “Mattie and I are…” Gilbert didn't even bother finishing, because of course Mr. Karpusi already knew, the cheeky bastard. The way he'd said the word “friend” was evidence enough.

That *is* what Gilbert had introduced him as on the first day of school last year, but it was more than obvious that Gilbert had found more than friendship. Much more. In fact, he had a strong feeling that that boy was the source of the new spark in Gilbert's eyes. Clearly he hadn't been the only one at this school who'd managed to get through to Gilbert Beilschmidt.

“Tell him I said hello.”

“Will do. Later, Mr. K,” he said, looking sheepish as he slipped out the door.

Chapter End Notes

Back at it again with the long ass chapters nobody asked for. But I hope the length made up for the wait!

I purposely glossed over/was vague about Gilbert's reconciliation with his dad because it'll be explored in detail in a future chapter, in case anyone was wondering.

I know seeing Gilbert beat himself up like this might read a little strange to some, but it has always been my headcanon that Gilbert's over-the-top personality is half his inherent extroversion, and half an overcompensation for his own insecurities within himself. I promise our sweet, angst-ridden German boy will get all the happiness he deserves and then some.

Her, Him, Us, Them

Chapter Summary

> He had done so much to be better for them. At least, that was what he thought. Instead, he had created a void that he wasn't even sure he could fill again if given the chance.

⠠⠓⠑⠗⠂ ⠠⠓⠊⠍⠂ ⠠⠥⠎⠂ ⠠⠮⠑⠍

It was cold in Berlin. Cold, but not unbearable. It was refreshing even, the way the chilly October air stung his cheeks and ears, leaving them red and tender to the touch. The first slivers of morning light crept their way through the trees, and Gerhardt turned his face toward it, thinking of how his sons had been under this same sun, and hoping that it had warmed them from the bitter cold he'd left behind in his absence.

October. Three months since he'd canceled his flight home. Three months since he stopped hearing Gilbert's voice. If Ludwig followed…he couldn't even bring himself to finish the thought.

"Look at them," came a weathered voice from his side. "Acting just like a couple of pups."

Gerhardt smiled, his gaze following his Doberman, Blackie, and his German Shepard, Berlitz, chasing each other around a large tree. "They still are in their heads, I'm sure. But they're getting up there. I found a little patch of gray in Ber's tail some weeks back."

"Is that so?"

"Mmhm. Blackie's hiding a little bit under his belly, too."

"Says you. You've got some of your age peaking through that beard of yours too, Gerry. I see you didn't bother shaving it for once."

Gerhardt frowned and brought a hand to the side of his face as his father laughed at him, feeling the short, rough stubble against his fingers. He didn't like it. It made him feel… unpolished. He preferred a clean shaven face as it was what he was used to, what he looked at in the mirror each morning before leaving for work. Usually, he'd never allow more than a day to pass before he brought out the razor. But today, well, he'd had no choice but to leave it until they got back home. His father had insisted that they leave the house before sunrise, so Gerhardt had looked longingly at his straight razor before settling for a brisk splash of water on his face and following his restless father out the door.

It was true, a very obvious patch of gray had made a home along his chin but that didn't bother him as much as his father thought it did. At forty-seven he had earned every one of his

grays, and he was just waiting for the day his facial hair was all one color again; it'd be less obnoxious that way.

With his gaze still lingering on Blackie and Berlitz, his hand left his face to slip back into the warmth of his coat pocket and he shifted slightly against the bench they both sat on, crossing his legs at the ankle. To his left, his father took a sip from the tin mug cupped in his hands, and even from the corner of his eye Gerhardt could see him smiling against the rim.

With a wry smile of his own, he watched Berlitz pounce on Blackie and replied, "With the way you were rushing me, I had no time to."

"Oh, I wasn't rushing you, boy. Was simply keeping time, is all."

Gerhardt had to look over at him then. "Keeping time. Really?"

The old man took another long sip from his mug, finishing off whatever remained, and sighed in satisfaction. "Yes. Exactly as I said it."

Gerhardt scoffed, smiling despite himself. His father had been up since four-thirty, had showered and had his oatmeal by four forty-five. Through spoonfuls he had mumbled about the day not going to waste while Gerhardt dragged his feet across the kitchen, turning on a pot of coffee. Gerhardt hadn't found it in himself to grumble back, though; it was one of his father's good days and he would be the last to complain when the old man was feeling good for once.

"Clearly we run on different clocks."

Frederick "Fritz" Beilschmidt waved a dismissive hand in his son's direction. "Either way, it's a good thing we made it when we did, or else we'd've missed this beautiful sight," he said, motioning to the sky with his empty mug.

Gerhardt's eyes left his father's figure to look over at the tops of distant trees, where slowly, but surely the pitch black sky was lightening into a gentle blue. The beginnings of dawn. It had been a while since they'd managed to come here before sunrise. And although he could've done without the impatient old man grumbling from the passenger side door this morning, he too was glad they'd made it in time, unplanned as it was.

"Alright, alright," he chuckled again, leaning down to grab the thermos at his feet. "I can't argue with that." He uncapped the lid, the scent of freshly brewed coffee wafting into the brisk morning air. "More?" he asked, even though he already knew what the answer would be. Fritz loved his coffee. They hadn't had time for their usual morning coffee at the kitchen table today, so Gerhardt brought along a flask for them to share at the park.

With a little grunt of gratitude, Fritz held out his cup, his hands the slightest bit shaky. Gerhardt noticed too, though he did not say anything. Instead, he steadied the cup with his hand supporting it at the bottom, and began pouring. Steam rose into the air, and Fritz's fingers curled around the mug as it warmed. Gerhardt glanced at his father's hands, pale and spotted with age, thin and wrinkled. How much they had changed from when he was just a

small boy, when he would place his own palms against them and marvel at how small and stubby his hands were in comparison.

Now, it was his father's that were smaller.

He grabbed his own mug from where he'd left it at the arm of the bench and poured himself another cup too. He made a mental note to pick up more coffee beans before they went back home; the stock they had at home was halfway finished. He capped the thermos and placed it back into his bag before bringing his mug to his lips. His father had been drinking this same brand of coffee for as long as Gerhardt could remember. He'd grimaced at the taste of it as a teen, but now, it tasted and smelled of his childhood, rich and warm.

"It suits you."

"Mm?" Gerhardt pulled his eyes away from his dogs again to look at Fritz.

"The beard," he said, taking another sip from his cup. "You'd do well to leave it alone."

Gerhardt just smiled. Of course he would say that, with a full white beard on his face. He had never even seen his father without a bushel of hair on his face, not unless he was counting the pictures in old photo albums. "I'll grow mine if you get rid of yours."

"Very funny," he replied with a laugh, readjusting the flat cap on his wispy head of hair. "You've taken a leave from work for the next three weeks, haven't you?"

Gerhardt looked down into his mug, the steam warming his face, the sharp scent coating his nostrils. "Mm," he said, the noise noncommittal, as if he could give back the time he had already taken off. He couldn't though; it was done, and he wasn't sure how he felt about the change in his routine. No office to go to, no meetings to be in. Nothing but time to spend with a man who was withering away and had no desire to be helped.

"Then what need is there for your clean-cut embassy boy persona. Live a little. Enjoy the time away."

"Dad," he sighed. "I didn't take leave to get tanned on the beach."

"Well, you should have," Fritz said, heaving a heavy sigh of his own. "I'd've rather had you leave work to do anything else other than fuss over me."

Gerhardt took a long sip from his mug, allowing the drink to warm him, to loosen the sudden tenseness in his muscles. He'd known since he'd woken up that they'd be having this conversation, but that didn't make it any easier. He sighed.

"If you won't let anyone else in that house, then I have no choice."

Fritz leaned back on the bench with resignation. If they were going to have this conversation again, then he wasn't going to be coddled. "You had your choice, Gerry. And you chose wrong."

Gerhardt gripped at his mug, his father's words like a slap across his face. "So I was supposed to just let you suffer alone."

"Gerry," he said, his voice a clear warning. "I'm not alone and I never have been."

All Gerhardt could hear was that his father hadn't denied that he was suffering. And it made him push back twice as hard. "Mom's ashes can't help you into the bath at night and sort your medicines," he said, jaw tightening. Fritz cared for his wife's remains as if they were the source of life itself. And in his heart, Gerhardt knew that those ashes were the only thing that tethered Fritz to this earth. He polished the intricate urn she rested in twice a day. Talked to her when he got up and before he went down to bed. Opened his bedroom curtains so that the sunlight reached where she sat atop his bedside drawer.

Over the years, seeing the way his father cared for his mother even after death used to make him smile through the sadness that she was gone. But now, it pained him. Because he knew that if his mother could see him now, frail and stubborn and isolated from the world around him, she wouldn't let him hear the end of it.

"You *need* someone to do that for you."

"No," he grunted, face screwing up as the words *hospice care* echoed in his mind. He remembered the brochure he'd received from the hospital, remembered the somber way his doctor had pulled his son out of the room and how Gerhardt had come back to him with glassy eyes, pleading with him to consider it. It had been three months since that day he'd collapsed onto his kitchen floor. Three months since his son had stayed in Germany like a fool and tried to convince him he knew better than his own father.

"I won't have some stranger walking about *our* home, telling me what and what not to do in my own house."

Our home. The way he said it sounded territorial, as if he feared that the old Beilschmidt home, with its outdated furniture, drafty windows, and creaky floors would cease to be his the moment he allowed someone else in.

"Dad," he pleaded, voice laced with frustration.

"Enough," he snapped.

But his son had always been stubborn with him. With Francine, he had been putty in her hands, accepting everything she said as if it was the gospel truth. With the way she doted on him as the youngest of their children, he supposed that was only natural. But with him, Gerry wanted all the answers *now*, all the reasons *why* and *why not*, wanted to give his rebuttal before Fritz had even finished his piece. It was one thing that he regretted passing down to his children, though he had no way of knowing he would.

"What if you collapse again? With the way Johanna makes herself scarce she can't be your first point of contact anymore."

Gerhardt couldn't help the disdain that bit through his voice when he spoke his sister's name. Shortly after she'd remarried, her efforts to see their father had plummeted, once a month turning into once or twice a year. Despite being the older sibling, Johanna had always been what his mother used to call "free spirited," though "restless" was the word Gerhardt would use. As young children he had been enamored by her boundless energy, the way she twirled in her dungarees and climbed the trunks of trees and pulled him along the secret overgrown paths in the forest behind their house. She was fearless, and he wanted to be just like her someday.

But as they grew into young adults, Gerhardt grew weary of that same spunk he once admired. Her constant need for excitement was draining. One minute she was majoring in film, then graphic design, then in journalism. For her first job she landed a position as an editor at a major news organization, but six months later she was leaving it to be an au pair in France. The way she quickly moved on from one thing to the next was completely alien to Gerhardt. At thirteen he'd already decided he wanted to be an ambassador, and from then on he'd never left the path he'd chosen. His sister, on the other hand, never seemed to stay on one course for too long, and it was the reason why her first marriage had ended after only a year.

When she met Liam though, she finally slowed down. Her second husband was a very soft spoken man with a calming presence. He was the antithesis of his sister, and Gehrardt supposed that was why they worked so well together. Unlike Johanna's first husband, he warmed himself at her fire instead of trying to dampen it, and soon his niece, Lili, was born, a little sister for Liam's young boy she had adopted as her own. Gerhardt had been happy for her, had beamed at her wedding, happy that she'd finally found satisfaction after all her years spent aimlessly searching for something, for someone worth letting down her anchor for.

But what she had gained in creating a family of her own was at the expense of the one she came from. After moving out of Germany for his new post in the States, Gerhardt had known that they wouldn't speak as much. Their growing distance became doubly true as he found himself trying to heal from his own divorce, and care for his two boys at the same time. Truthfully, Gerhardt had been satisfied with the bare minimum calls they had during every Christmas or New Years; as long as he heard that his sister was fine, then so was he.

But then, their father fell ill and their relationship soured. Having now built a new life overseas, Gerhardt made his sister promise to look after their father, and at first she'd kept her word. But then the years passed and Fritz got even sicker, and before Gerhardt knew it, Johanna hadn't been to visit him in months.

"Don't you talk about your sister that way," Fritz said through a deep frown, staring him down in that way that used to make him scurry as a child. Now, Gerhardt stared right back.

"You know it's true."

"Anna has a life of her own, a family," he said.

Gerhardt remembered Johanna saying those exact same words through the phone last year, her voice angry and tired. "If dad doesn't want to even *try* to get help at home, then what exactly am I supposed to do? The last time we visited he had such a coughing fit that it made

Lili cry! She was so afraid for him. And Basch looked white as a sheet on the drive back home. I don't want them to see him like that. *I* don't want to see him like that!"

The next time he saw his sister was in their father's hospital room, three months ago. Her eyes were red and wet as she looked down at the old man between them and he would never forget the way she looked up at him, with a deep pain in her eyes that said *I give up*.

And it meant that Gerhardt *couldn't*.

He shrunk back as Fritz swung his mug in his direction, accusatory, coffee spilling out and onto the dewy grass at their feet. "*You* have a family too, Gerhardt. Or have you forgotten?"

Another slap to his face. And this time, it stung like nothing else.

"You've hurt that boy so badly that he refuses to talk to you," he said, shaking his head. He looked away then, his cloudy eyes fixed on the rich colors of dawn. "I didn't spend all those years raising you just for you to be a ghost of a father."

"I know what I've done," he said quietly. "And I deserve every bit of Gilbert's anger. Ludwig doesn't show his frustration like Gilbert does, but I know he's upset too."

"And yet you stay here, with your children resenting you."

"The paramedics found you passed out on your kitchen *floor!" he shouted, the image of his father's dried blood on the checkered tile burned into his memory. "You could have died had they not made it there in time!"*

"That *was* my time!" Fritz shouted back, gripping at his chest from the exertion of it. "That was my time and they—" he wheezed and took in a shallow breath, "they *stole* it from me."

Gerhardt stared at his father, frozen, a deep feeling of dread creeping into his chest. Because his fear had been confirmed. Refusing help, choosing to isolate himself. His father didn't want to be here anymore.

Fritz wheezed again and leaned over, gasping on his first cough of the day. He coughed and coughed and coughed until sounds so violent erupted from his throat that their dogs came running over, barking their heads off. In the middle of it all Fritz grappled weakly for the cannula that rested in his lap while Gerhardt did his best to calm Blackie and Berlitz down. Gerhardt watched as precious seconds passed while Fritz struggled to insert the prongs into his nose, and despite how much he wanted to turn on his oxygen concentrator for him, he stood back and watched father do it himself. Once it was on, he inhaled deeply allowing the extra oxygen to fill his lungs.

Gerhardt could only wait in silence, rubbing Berlitz's head absently as he thought about what his father just admitted to. Fritz was the first to speak, letting out a deep sigh as he pet Blackie to ease her whimpering.

"I miss her, Gerry. And I'm tired." He breathed in and out again, the sounds rough like sandpaper. "Tired of this body failing me." He looked down at the grass, finding his cup

among the green blades. He picked it up, brushed it off and turned to his son.

"Please," he said.

With numb fingers, Gerhardt picked up his thermos from the ground and uncapped it. Fritz's arm was shaking as he held out his mug. So Gerhardt reached out to steady it, saying nothing as he poured, the rich scent of Fritz's favorite coffee wafting between them. While Blackie and Berlitz made their way back to their tree to play once more, the two sat in heavy silence and sipped.

"When was the last time you and your sister spoke?" Fritz asked suddenly, his voice just above a whisper.

Gerhardt rubbed at his chin and sighed. "Three months ago." *In your hospital room*, he wanted to add. But he didn't, because he knew that Fritz already knew that.

Fritz let out a sigh of his own. "If I leave this earth with you kids treating each other like this, your mother will send me right back."

Gerhardt poured the last of the coffee into Fritz's cup with a wry twitch of his lips. "And she'd be right to."

Fritz laughed, followed by his son. He threw back his head to finish off the last of his joe, savoring the taste of a bitterness that, for once, wasn't his own. "God, do I miss her."

"I know, dad. I do too."

Fritz took in a deep breath, the cold air stinging his failing lungs. He missed her. And she had left him, grieving and longing for the day they would meet again. But all the years of waiting would mean nothing if he couldn't look Francine in the eye and tell her that their children were okay.

"Call Anna today," he said after some time. "Find out her schedule." Gerhardt looked over at him, confused, but Fritz's eyes were off somewhere far away as he stroked at his bushy beard. "I won't be the reason my children treat each other like strangers."

Gerhardt still wasn't following, and began to say as much. "Dad, I don't—"

"We'll go to this damned hospital, the three of us. Find a solution that satisfies us all."

Gerhardt stared at his father's profile, shock stiffening his shoulders and back. It took him longer than he'd planned to find his words, which came tumbling out like a child taking its first steps. "It won't—" he started, "It's not going to be that easy." Fritz was still looking at everything but him, age-spotted hands cupped tightly around his empty mug as if it were his own pride. "Dad," he said softly, and Fritz finally looked at him as the mug was pulled from his hands. The look he was met with, a mix of fear and resignation, made his next words all the more important to say.

"If you can't stand to hear that you need outside help, then we'll be wasting our time."

Fritz settled his hands in his lap, seeming to shrink into himself just the slightest bit. "I've wasted enough time as it is," he said, shaking his head. He sat up and readjusted his back against the bench, the simple action making him wince in pain. But then he felt his son's hand on his shoulder, and the sun on his face, and the pain became a bit more bearable.

"When I was working the mines and walked home with my blackened face and clothes, people looked at me with such reverence. And now, when the mines have blackened my lungs, all I see in people's eyes is pity. I'll be damned if I let a complete stranger come into my home and look at me that way."

"Dad…" Gerhardt began, but stopped himself as Fritz put up a hand to silence him.

"I'll take the help and the help alone. Without pity, or patronizing. I want to live out the rest of my years with dignity." He turned to Gerhardt again to look at him face to face, and Gerhardt was struck by his father's eyes, how the guardedness in them had completely vanished, replaced by something calmer. "If you can get through to Anna, tell her I've changed my mind. And that I want you both to come with me to my first appointment."

Gerhardt stared at him as he adjusted the cannula around his ears, stunned. He realized then that his heart was racing. Racing in a way that it hadn't since he'd gotten the frantic call from Anna that left him rushing out of the embassy, his suit jacket abandoned in a crumpled heap over the back of his office chair. But this time, his heart beat with a different kind of intensity. With an overwhelming feeling of relief, anticipation, and—most of all—gratitude.

"What…" he began "What changed your mind?"

"Us, Gerry. Look at us. You, your sister and I." He leaned back the slightest bit, clasping his hands on his stomach as he watched their dogs stretch out under a tree. "We've taken each other for granted, since your mother passed."

"How can you expect to make peace with your boys if you haven't done the same with Anna?" Gerhardt looked away at the mention of his children, while his brow wrinkled at his sister's name. "Or with me." He looked up, damp brown earth replaced with his father's weak smile. "I'm dying, Gerry. And you need to make your peace with that. It's going to happen whether you're here with me or not."

And with those words, Gerhardt's eyes began to moisten. Because Fritz had helped him through one of the darkest periods of his life. Helped him find his footing in the midst of the affair and the custody disputes and the realization that he no longer had a wife—and his children no longer had a present mother. Knowing that his own failure as a husband was also to blame had made the pain that much more debilitating, and if his father hadn't opened his home and taken him and his boys in, there was no telling where his mind might have taken him.

As if sensing the severe shift in his mood, Blackie came running over with his wild tail wagging, trailed by Berlitz. Instinctively, he reached out and ran a hand over Blackie's soft, floppy ears, comforted by the familiarity of them as his tears finally spilled over. Next to him, Fritz patted at Berlitz's head and the two shared another silence as their dogs let them lose themselves, if only for a moment, in the early morning hours of another day in Berlin.

It was only when both dogs had settled at their feet, curled up with contentment, that Fritz broke the silence. "How often do you think about them?" he asked, though he already knew the answer.

Gerhardt balled his hands into fists, resting them at his knees. His cheeks were still wet with tears, turned cold by the frigid air. "Everyday," he said, straining against the knot in his throat. "Staying here was selfish."

After he'd left Mia, he'd sworn to himself he'd be twice as good a parent—to make up for his absence as a father when Mia was still around, and to fill the emptiness she'd left behind once the divorce was finalized. And yet, here he was on the other side of the world, doing exactly the opposite. Failing as a parent, again. So afraid of losing his own father that he'd left his own children without theirs.

He had done so much to be better for them. At least, that was what he thought. Instead, he had created a void that he wasn't even sure he could fill again if given the chance. How he hoped that Gilbert, that Ludwig, would forgive him.

Fritz nodded, and placed a hand on his son's shoulder. "I need you to be a better parent to those boys than I was to you. Guide them. Reassure them. Never let them forget how much you love them. Don't let them become us."

Gerhardt nodded back as his father squeezed his shoulder, his love left unsaid, but felt in the warmth of his touch.

"Now," Fritz said, heaving himself up and off the bench and to his feet. "let's head back, sort through the mail. I have a feeling we'll be learning more about Matthew."

Gerhardt couldn't help breaking into to a grin at that, wiping away the last remnants of regret from his face. *Matthew*, he thought, *of course*. He whistled for his dogs and stood. And as he watched them sprint over, basking in their freedom, he prayed for the day he would feel just as free from the sins of his past, and his present.

Please drop by the Archive and comment to let the creator know if you enjoyed their work!